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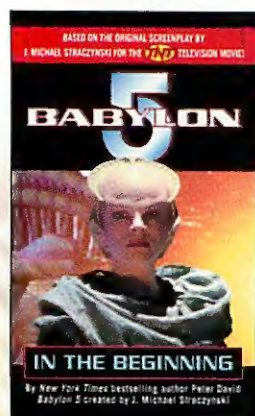
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SCIENCE FICTION AGE

F I C T I O N

COVER: When the aliens finally arrive, it will be in that moment when we least expect them. Art by Chris Moore. **ABOVE:** The Gallery focus this issue is on the award-winning art of Don Maitz. See page 28 for further masterworks.

D E P A R T M E N T S

6 EDITORIAL

The life of a science fiction editor is all paper cuts and buried treasures.

8 LETTERS

Readers write about *Starship Troopers* and the beauty of Robert Silverberg.

10 BOOKS BY RICHARD PARKS, PAUL DI FILIPPO AND D. DOUGLAS FRATZ

Kirinyaga collected, *Dinosaur* revisited, and *Cosm-ic* SF publishing line reborn.

18 ALTERNATIVE MEDIA

Hot tips on the best new SF comics, collectibles, music and more.

22 TELEVISION BY DAN PEREZ

It's time to chalk up TV's science fictional winners and losers.

28 SCIENCE BY GEOFFREY A. LANDIS

Space scientists make the choice: Do we go to Mars or settle for the Moon?

28 GALLERY BY KAREN HABER

The award-winning Artist Guest of Honor at the 1997 World Science Fiction Convention gives us all a glimpse into his creative heart.

92 GAMES BY ERIC T. BAKER

The year's best SF gaming experience started out as both a top movie and novel.

98 INTERNET BY CORY DOCTOROW

A selection of Net-based Science Fiction treats.

36 CRAPHOUND

by Cory Doctorow

With Earth a galactic junkyard, the only thing alien is exactly why the otherworldly tourists bother to keep visiting.

43 THE COLONEL IN AUTUMN

by Robert Silverberg

The Entities descended and effortlessly stole Earth's freedom. The Colonel would risk everything to get that freedom back.

64 I BORROW DAVE'S TIME MACHINE

by S. N. Dyer

If you had a time machine, would you kill Hitler, make a killing in the stock market, or just kill time?

66 FOUNDING FATHERS

by Stephen Dedman

In seeking out brave new worlds, all they found were the same old prejudices.

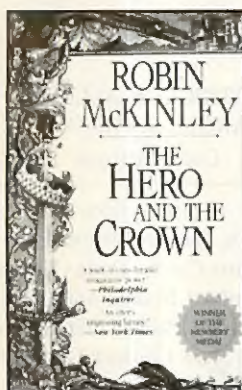
84 SKIN DRAGONS TALK

by Ernest Hogan

Goro Beltram was the scum of the Earth. Now the Yakuza — and a mysterious and invisible friend — were helping him to become the scum of the Moon as well.

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The life of a science fiction editor is all paper cuts and buried treasures.

IF YOU'RE IN THE MOOD FOR A SCARE, YOU don't have to go to the trouble of watching a horror movie like *Scream 2* — you can just come to the office and look at the top of my desk. An editor's desk is a dangerous thing. Each month brings me thousands of pieces of mail, and the more I sort through, the more the United States Post Office insists on bringing to my door.

The short story submissions alone cause the sacrifice of countless trees. Approximately 750 short stories compete each month for the 5-6 slots open every other month.

Then there are the manufacturers of books, games, CDs, video tapes, and collectibles of every kind, who ship their wares to us by the hundreds, hoping for a mention in our pages. Every day is Christmas here at Sovereign Media, and when the mail comes, I sometimes get to feeling that it must be my birthday.

Keeping up with all of this mail steals too much of the day, and separating the items worth recommending from those that deserve a quick trip to the recycling bins isn't easy. But attention must be paid, or else the wheat will be tossed out with the chaff.

One of the short stories published in this issue proves my point. Hidden recently amongst the many hundreds of short stories that pour in each month was "Craphound," Cory Doctorow's tale of a decidedly different alien contact. "Craphound" is Doctorow's first professionally published short story. In answer to the folks who think that editing is simple — "just read the submissions from the big names," they sometimes say — it's finding the stories from folks at the beginnings of their careers that is the most important and most rewarding. With those evil book publishers stealing short story writers and forcing them into high-paying careers as novelists, the science fiction magazines will always depend on those just starting out. So while I am obviously pleased to be presenting a novella from Robert Silverberg this issue, editorial rewards differ. Anyone would eagerly rip open an envelope from a writer on the level of a Silverberg and give it great care when rendering an editorial decision — but for the Doctorows of the world to start being read by *you* requires close attention to that tsunami of text that the postal employees sling through our door each day.

If you could eavesdrop on editors when they are together at conventions, you'd know that the acquisitions that give them the most pride are those from beginners. Every editor wants bragging rights on those writers they published first. It's how they prove that they are follow-

ing the storytelling adage set down by Stephen King: "The tale, not he who tells it." That's how we prove that we truly pay attention to the words on the page, and not the name on the envelope, in bringing you the best SF out there.

Care must be taken in other ways as well. With items sent for review, there is often the tendency to pay attention to the sizzle, instead of the steak. Hype is always present, ready to overwhelm you. Sturdy hardcovers with glossy covers call out, sometimes shouting for attention with embossings or gold foil. But it is what is *beneath* the covers that is important (a maxim that will serve you well in more than one area), and so an editor must cast his or her eye further afield than to those publishers who can afford to garb their product in the equivalent of high-priced designer dresses.

Consider *Vance Space*, a modest 60 page booklet from Sirius Fiction with the subtitle, *A Rough Guide to the Planets of the Alastor Cluster, the Gaeen Reach, the Oikumene, & other exotic sectors from the Science Fiction of Jack Vance*. Vance is one of our greatest SF writers, and you don't have to take just my word alone for it — he was last year proclaimed a Grandmaster by the membership of the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America. He's been taking us to unique worlds for over 50 years, often winning awards for the rich settings of his imaginative works.

Vance's work has spanned numerous alien worlds, and author Michael Andre-Druissi, who last dissected the fiction of Gene Wolfe in his book *Lexicon Urthus*, has decided to take us on a tour of exotic locales created by this quirky author. *Vance Space* bears all the marks of a humble labor of love, lacking the frills that a major New York publishing house would give to it. It could easily be overlooked by some amidst the torrent of expensive packaging. But *Vance Space* contains in its homemade pages all the information you'd ever need to know about the galactic empires and planetary attributes of SF's latest Grandmaster. Contact the publisher for further information at m.druissi@genie.com, and hopefully he will continue at his labor of love, and give me more treasures to find amongst the trash.

And so it goes, the endless panning for gold in the mines of science fiction. Putting out an SF magazine requires eternal vigilance, because part of the job is uncovering hidden treasures. (It also requires a forklift, as assistant editor Chris Pearson would agree, as the tubs of mail get tossed at him first.) I'm glad that you're along for the journey.

Scott Edelman

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MARK HINTZ
Publisher

CARL A. GNAM, JR.
Editorial Director

SCOTT EDELMAN
Editor

CHRISTINA KRUG
Graphic Designer

CHRIS PEARSON
Editorial Assistant

PATRICIA A. ALLEN
CAROLE R. PASCOE
Copy Editors

Contributors:

Eric T. Baker, Michael Bishop, Ben Bova, Adam-Troy Castro, Doug Chezem, Gregory Benford, Ronald Anthony Cross, Vincent Di Fate, Paul Di Filippo, Harlan Ellison, Craig Shaw Gardner, Connie Hirsch, Alfred Kamajian, Geoffrey A. Landis, Annie Lunsford, Barry N. Malzberg, Resa Nelson, Allen Steele, Martha Soukup, Charles Sheffield, Don Webb, Michael Whelan.

DIANE BONIFANTI
Business Manager

KELLY KING
Fulfillment Consultant

AMANDA SMITH
Finance & Circulation Manager

CARI WYNNE
Production Manager

JULIAN CHRISTOPHER
ALI LORAIN
Production Assistants

STEVE DORBOWSKI
Circulation Manager

WARNER PUBLISHER SERVICES
International Distribution

Newsstand Consultant
ARTHUR O'HARE

Advertising Offices:

JOE VARDIA
Advertising Director

NIKKI ANDERSON
Advertising Assistant

11305 Sunset Hills Rd. Reston Va 20190
703-471-1556 / FAX: 703-471-1559

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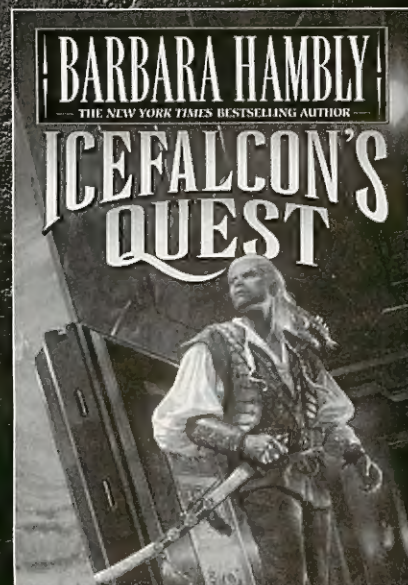
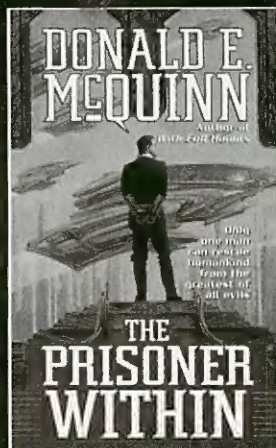
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LETTERS

Dear *Science Fiction Age*:

Your magazine is far and away the most worthwhile and thought provoking magazine I subscribe to, and I want to thank you for giving me one of the best short stories I have yet to read in your publication. Robert Silverberg's "Beauty in the Night" was one of the most heartbreaking and horrifying stories science fiction has put out this year. Reading as Ken underwent the constant torment his "long-lost father" gave him and his grandmother (like the changing of his name as soon as his father gets the chance, the constant hitting, and worse yet, Ken watching his grandmother being raped by his father Richie) I couldn't help comparing their situation to those of many American families today, as I am sure was Mr. Silverberg's intent. Domestic violence is a subject many of us would rather like to avoid thinking and reading about, but unfortunately, it is out there and it demands our attention if it is to ever stop. Silverberg has done a wonderful job of giving us an unfortunate but altogether real portrayal of domestic violence. It has got my vote as one of the best short stories of the year.

Please continue to keep up the good work in finding the best science fiction out there today and I will surely be a life-long subscriber.

Sheldon Ehli

Dear Mr. Edelman:

I am convinced that the novel *Starship Troopers* has been destroyed by Neumeir, his producer Jon Davison and Paul Verhoeven, the movie's director.

To answer some of the objections raised in the article, I went back to the novel. The classroom scenes mentioned by Neumeir occupy approximately 14 pages of a 208 page book. When he says the book is a political treatise he is closer to the mark. This is where the problems start. Current Hollywood political correctness would never permit Heinlein's philosophy of patriotism, loyalty and discipline to make it to the screen.

Neumeir says the budget didn't allow for any use of powered armor. I find it interesting that he then goes into raptures about the bugs and how the budget trade-off went in favor of them. I've asked several friends who are much more computer oriented than I and they tell me that once a single bug is set up, it's easy to make whatever is necessary on the computer. The book only mentioned four types of bugs, only two of which (workers and warriors) are described in

detail. Neumeir et al have created many subspecies of bugs, unnecessary to the original book but great to waste CG money on. With a budget of \$110 million available, not having the money for a totally essential plot element like powered armor is ludicrous.

The point as I see it is Neumeir didn't want to touch Heinlein's ideas, used the lack of budget as an excuse for not including powered armor and decided they would create their own version of *Jurassic Park/Lost World* with the bugs as their dinosaurs. In this way they would avoid a philosophy they are uncomfortable with and don't understand, stay politically correct among their Hollywood brethren and make lots of money producing a formula movie.

Mr. Neumeir, Robert A. Heinlein would be very upset by what you have done to *Starship Troopers*. Heinlein fans are upset about the film. The only prescient thing you said in the article was that the fan base was used to seeing their favorite things destroyed by Hollywood. You spoke the truth, as you and your associates have done just that.

Michael E. Tenenbaum

Dear Mr. Edelman:

Although I've only subscribed to *Science Fiction Age* for the past year, I plan to keep that subscription going for some time. The reason—one story. "A Chicago Dinner Party, Sometime After."

I'm glad it made the Reader's Choice list because it was the only story I voted for, and we all like to see our candidates win. To be honest, I'm not sure why I voted for it. I like a lot of the stories in your magazine. I just know that the first time I read it I was cooking my dinner and thought maybe I had misunderstood. I immediately read it again while my dinner burned and thought it was strange. After the smoke cleared, I read it yet again and thought it was fascinating in that driving-past-an-accident-and-you-have-to-look-kind-of-way... and now I'm writing a letter to the editor, thinking it was one of the most memorable stories, in any genre, I've ever encountered. It must be tough being an editor. You probably see some pretty bizarre stuff cross your desk. I'm glad you saw past the "too weird" of this story and found the "memorable."

Annelise Daniel

Readers—please let us know how we're doing at: Letters to the Editor, Science Fiction Age, 11305 Sunset Hills Rd., Reston VA 20190. For e-mail, use scottiedelman@erols.com. or our CompuServe address of 102746,2004.

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Kirinyaga collected, *Dinosaur* revisited, and a *Cosm-ic* SF publishing line reborn.



ABOVE: Author Greg Bear—with an art assist from Tony DiTerlizzi—brings you back to the original *Lost World in Dinosaur Summer*.

I COULD START OFF BY SAYING SOMETHING LIKE “unless you’ve been vacationing out in the Oort Cloud for the past couple decades, you’re well aware of Mike Resnick’s award-winning *Kirinyaga* stories.” I could then point out that here they are, finally collected in one volume and what more needs be said? I could do both these things, that is, if life and this book were as simple as that.

First of all, the author himself considers these tales chapters in a book rather than separate stories with a common setting and, except for the first one, “*Kirinyaga*,” this is the way they were planned and written. They were published separately but they were never meant to remain so. Also, sad to say, there is a considerable fraction of the science fiction reading community who just doesn’t read short stories, never touches the magazines, and only knows Mike Resnick from his novels. To these people, *Kirinyaga: A Fable of Utopia* (del Rey, hardcover, 293 pages, \$25.00) will be either completely new or, at most, something they’d heard of but never seen. It stands to reason that a reviewer, whatever the venue, has to look at this book not as a collection, but as a unified entity and try to see if the whole does justice to the parts.

The book begins and ends with one man, Koriba. Koriba is a man in love with an idea; his vision of a purely Kikuyu tribal utopia. As the story begins, it is 22nd Century Kenya. The lion and the elephant are long since extinct. Almost as extinct is the Kikuyu tribal culture itself, subsumed—as was that of the Masai and other tra-

ditional tribes—into what Koriba considers an artificial, ersatz European nation-state, Kenya. Koriba rejects his considerable European-style education as well as Kenya itself and, with colonists of similar views, migrates to a terraformed planetoid called *Kirinyaga*, after the Kikuyu’s holy mountain, home of the supreme god Ngai. Koriba becomes the new colony’s *mundumugu*, traditionally the cultural arbiter, teacher, storyteller, keeper of the tribal lore, medicine man, and High Priest all rolled into one. There are village chiefs among the colonists, but it is Koriba who is the supreme authority on all matters dealing with the proper way to live as a Kikuyu, and thus it is Koriba who holds most of the real power in the colony. More, Koriba controls the computer link to Maintenance, which is the planetary authority that regulates the climate on *Kirinyaga*.

When Koriba says that Ngai is displeased and will bring a drought, he’s not kidding, because all he has to do is call Maintenance and arrange it. So it is with a mixture of tradition backed by the demonstrable will of Ngai that Koriba hopes to maintain his vision of *Kirinyaga*.

“His” vision is an important distinction. Though all who made the original journey to *Kirinyaga* shared the basic idea of a Kikuyu homeland and culture, not everyone is happy with Koriba’s strict interpretation of that charter, and the testing of Koriba’s authority begins almost immediately. It is this conflict that creates the impetus for most of the narrative of *Kirinyaga*. Each chapter/story revolves around a danger to *Kirinyaga*’s social order as Koriba perceives it, and how he deals or fails to deal with that threat. The real danger is seldom physical. Chapter 3, “Bwana,” is probably the only section that falls into that category, however tenuously, as Koriba faces a lone Masai interloper with his own ideas of what utopia means. Even in that instance the physical danger is a poor second to the potential damage to *Kirinyaga*’s fragile social order, and that is what Koriba is really defending, not the lives and freedom of his people or even his own life. It follows then that each story/chapter can be read as a question posed to the reader about the nature of Koriba’s utopia, and I’d be amazed if the reader reaches the same conclusion that Koriba invariably does.

It’s been said that the true test of any society is how well it treats its poorest and worst, but a truer test for *Kirinyaga* might well be how it treats its best and brightest. If “For I Have Touched the Sky” and “The Manamouki” are any

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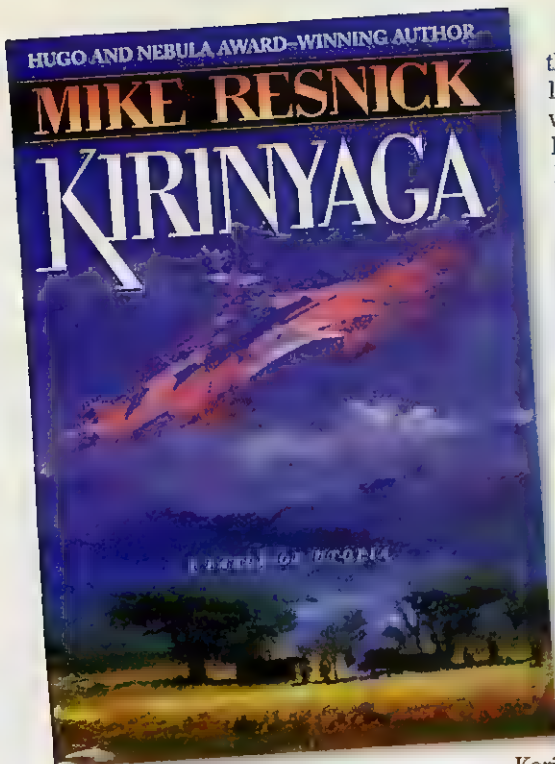


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indication, the answer would have to be: Not very well. "For I Have Touched the Sky" is the more poignant of the two, concerning a little girl who is a natural genius. Two problems: she's a genius. And she's a girl. Genius in any gender package doesn't have much room to maneuver in Kirinyaga's unchanging society and women have even less. In Koriba's vision there's simply no place for little Kamari, no outlet for her natural abilities that doesn't threaten the social order. Tragedy is inevitable, and it comes. The same set of pressures are also at work in "The Manamouki," where a new immigrant, although not the genius that Kamari was, is nevertheless innovative and gifted in a society that can value neither outside the rigid social order. People are only of value as they serve that social order, not themselves and, try as she might, Mwange cannot stop being herself in order to be fully Kikuyu.

One can argue that this is a Western/European view of a traditional African culture and fails to place the society in its proper context. Fair enough. As the book progresses, however, one can see that it is precisely that context that is the greatest threat of all to Kirinyaga, simply because it is missing. Whether one agrees with its tenets or not, Kikuyu tribal culture existed as it did for a reason. There was a rationale for the patriarchal organization, a reason for the division of labor that no longer exists and, on Kirinyaga, never did. Young men are trained to be warriors on a world that needs no warriors. They cannot even become hunters because that is not the traditional Kikuyu way. There is no justification for their lives of ease and idleness while the women work themselves to death to care for the home and the fields. Of course some men see this as a good thing, but it's slow torture for the more intelligent and ambitious young men who need an outlet for

their natural gifts and a purpose to their lives which Kirinyaga simply cannot provide. The problems shows clearly in "The Lotus and the Spear." In this chapter Koriba tries to supply some of that missing context, but it's a poor substitute for real meaning.

The Kikuyu Utopia that Koriba envisions is clearly a manifestation of himself. He cannot and will not change, and thus he cannot allow Kirinyaga to change. Koriba sometimes regrets what he does, but he never, ever, questions it, even as the vision of Kirinyaga slowly slips from his grasp. While there is some hint of what the colonists have lost as Kirinyaga starts its inevitable transformation, the final coda in "The Land of Nod" is not justification. Rather, it is a clear statement of the sort of utopia a man like Koriba, or indeed probably anyone, can ever really know.

In *Kirinyaga* Resnick tells a deceptively simple story, much like one of Koriba's fables in itself. Unlike Koriba's listeners you are free to make up your own mind as to meanings. Take what lessons you will, but don't rush through. Read slowly, and consider. Highly recommended.

Richard Parks

***Dinosaur Summer*, by Greg Bear. Warner Aspect, hardcover, \$29.95, 325 pages)**

Perhaps it happened to you when you were twelve years old and discovered Heinlein's *Tunnel in the Sky* (1955). Or could it have been that year you were fifteen and saw *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981) ten times?

Whatever your tender age, whatever the book or movie, you know what I'm talking about. That viewing or reading experience so visceral it practically hurt, a dream of gaudy adventures in a big world of possibilities. You don't forget such an encounter, and chances are you've been looking to replicate the sensations ever since.

Well, youthful nirvana is once more within reach. All you need to do is to purchase Greg Bear's lovingly and expertly crafted adventure, *Dinosaur Summer*. Whether you're one of those bright and eager "Young Adults" targeted by the publishing industry or a savvy and somewhat skeptical older reader such as myself, you'll soon be marvelling at Bear's drawing four aces in a game of literary poker you would've sworn was rigged against him.

Dinosaur Summer is a sequel of a particularly tricky variety. Here's the backstory.

In 1912, Arthur Conan Doyle, Sherlock's daddy, invented his second-most famous character, Professor Challenger. Challenger's first tale was *The Lost World* (yes, Virginia, the title had a previous life before being, um, appropriated). A brilliant but prickly British savant, Challenger led a small expedition to a hidden South American plateau where dinosaurs still roamed. Marooned, the explorers underwent numerous trials, barely escap-

ing with their lives. Deftly mixing doses of accurate Edwardian science and informed speculation with frightening battles and frenzied flights, the book still fascinates today. Doyle's novel provides an essential starting point for readers of Bear's book (although if you're short of time, you won't be baffled by the Bear if you skip the Doyle).



Dinosaur Summer opens nearly fifty years after Challenger's expedition, in the same fictional landscape (although Challenger and his crew are gone). To say this much instantly means one thing: Bear's book is—incidentally, but not inconsequentially—an alternate history. The somewhat plausible events of Doyle's period have since been forbidden on our timeline. So we are now in a world where the discovery of living dinosaurs has subtly warped the history we know. Bear is very diligent about illustrating such effects, but the uchronic aspects of the novel are strictly secondary. The 1947 of Bear's invention is nearly identical to ours—save for extant thunder lizards and their impact. (The wittiest repercussion of these living anachronisms is that their presence has discouraged Hollywood from producing fantasy cinema, since the public is sated with real monsters! *King Kong* (1933), for instance, whose creators figure intimately in Bear's tale, was a flop!)

Bear quickly establishes that the fear expressed at the end of Doyle's book has—in this sequel—long ago come true. Doyle's narrator worried that "that strange land [would] soon [be] vulgarized, the prey of hunter and prospector...." Such came to pass. Dinosaurs were ripped from the El Grande plateau in Venezuela to serve as circus acts all over the world. Abuses were so rampant that the plateau was eventually closed to humans by irate governments. Now, the only dinos in the USA are a handful in the circus of Lothar Gluck, managed by the tough and dour trainer Vince Shellbarger, a Clyde Beatty type. Partly out of humanitarian motives, partly as

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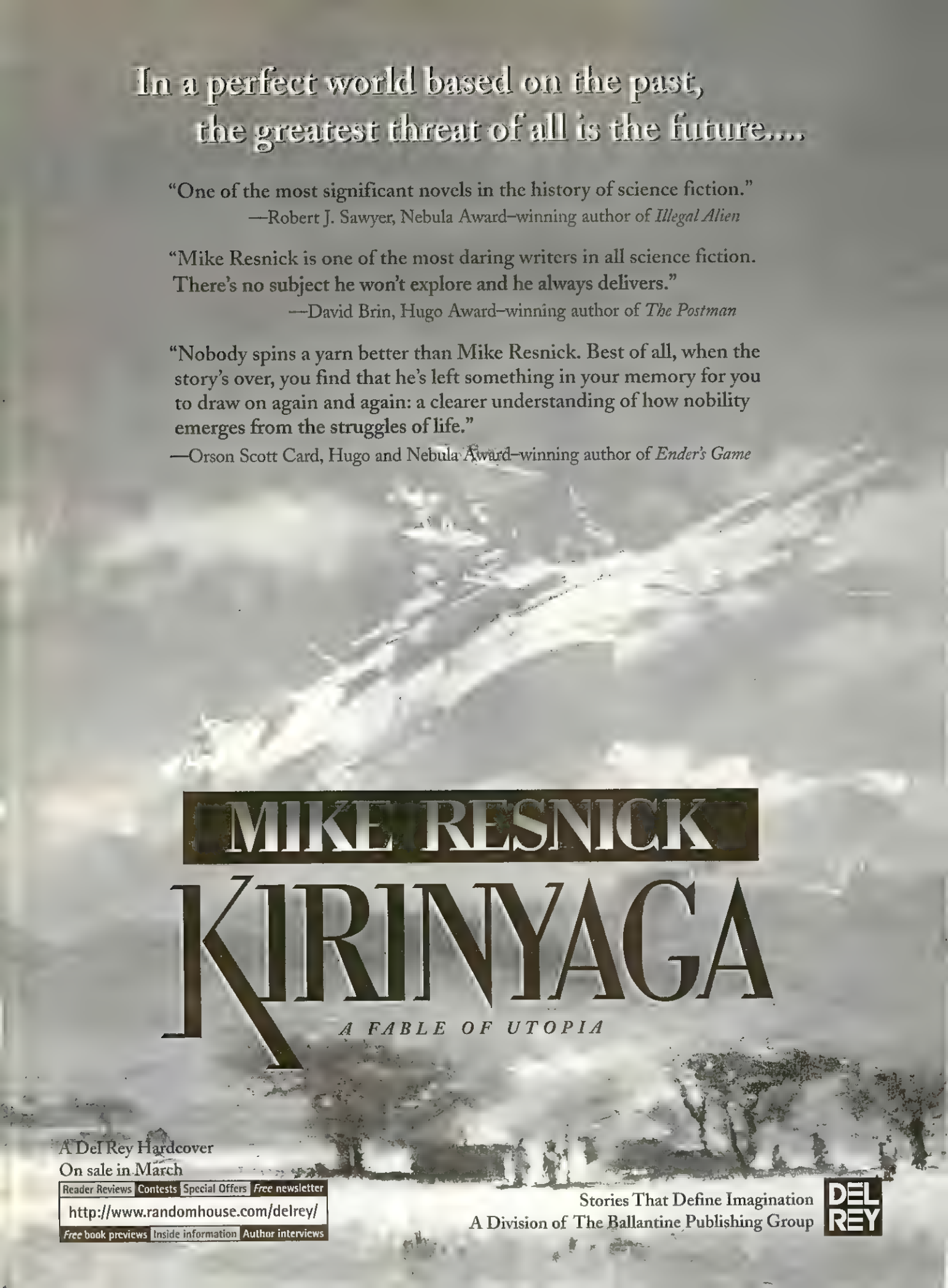
—Robert J. Sawyer, Nebula Award-winning author of *Illegal Alien*

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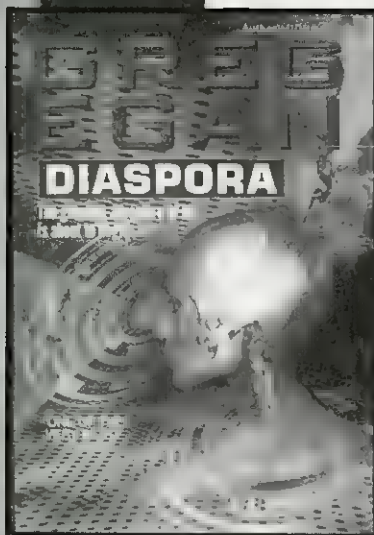
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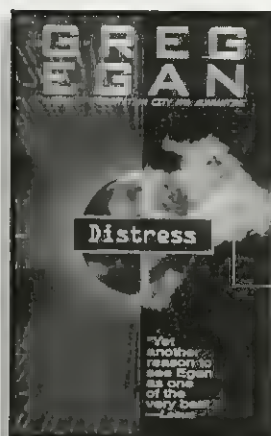


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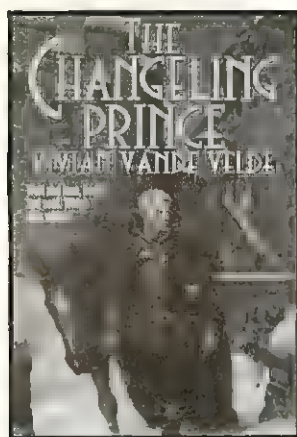
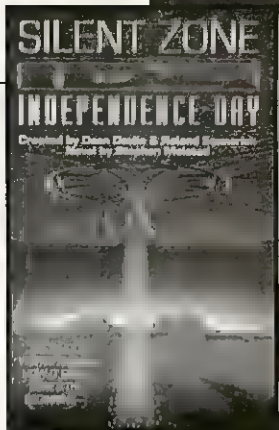
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a publicity stunt, the dinos will now be repatriated to Venezuela, much as naturalists today release eagles or wolves into the wild.

Our consistently empathetic and unwavering viewpoint on this brave yet foolhardy enterprise is a teenaged youth named Peter Belzoni. His father, Anthony, is a freelance photographer-journalist commissioned by National Geographic to cover the mission. In a spasm of dark whimsy and paternal interest, Anthony decides to bring Peter along. (As a character, Anthony is extremely reminiscent of the kind of alternately feckless and bold middle-aged protagonist often found in James Blaylock's books.)

This choice of using a teenage viewpoint is inspired, and is actually an echo of Doyle's decision to have *The Lost World* narrated by a similar voice of callow inexperience. Peter's youth allows things to be realistically explained to him (and hence the reader). The boy's relationship with his father and his distant, divorced mother offer plenty of tense Oedipal subtext (more on this later). And finally, the book now serves the secondary purpose of portraying an individual's danger-accelerated journey to maturity. In Peter, Bear has developed a sympathetic multipurpose character.

To summarize the action of the book would be to deprive you of its taut excitement. Suffice it to say that the repatriation of the dinos is neither easy nor totally successful, and that even the best preparations of the team fail to stand up to every contingency. The mortality of beast and human is a constant sword of Damocles. And the final few chapters of this book read like a slambang sequence out of Harry Harrison's *Deathworld* (1960).

Bear excels in imagining and conveying the pure gritty reality of such an enterprise, from the details of shoveling dino shit to the way bipedal struthios hold their feet when walking. In a prose style radically simplified from the info-dense manner of his other novels—a prose style that should serve as a model of clarity for other writers intent on reaching as wide an audience as possible—Bear conjures up actual and imaginary dinos as real as the cat on your lap. In this he is much aided by Pyle-quality color and B&W illustrations by Tony DiTerlizzi.

My one cavil with the book is the lack of female characters. Their plausible yet troubling absence would be less marked if it were not for a real subtext in which the feminine is actually seen as deadly. The swamps and jungles of South America—as in Hudson's *Green Mansions* (1904)—are unmistakably a symbol of female fecundity. But unlike the Hudson portrayal, Bear's jungles are killers. This symbolism might be ignored until the moment when, atop the plateau, Peter and his comrades are trapped by hive-dwelling "communisaurs" and brought to face the vicious nest-mother, described as a reeking "floozy." Plainly we are meant to identify this reptilian mother with Peter's absent and coldhearted Mom. Bear is too conscious a writer not to have planted this analogy deliberately, and

one wonders what purpose it serves, other than to alienate girl fans.

Yet, exercising charity for the deliverance of so much excitement, one can only heartily endorse Bear's generally humane treatment of both people and dinosaurs in this stirring return to an SF classic.

Paul Di Filippo

Cosm, by Gregory Benford. Avon Books, hardcover; 352 pp., \$23.00

The vast majority of hard science fiction writers today are not working scientists. Given the great difficulty of managing two such time- and energy-intensive careers, this isn't really surprising. Over the past three decades, very few working scientists have been more prolific authors of hard SF than Gregory Benford.

Although Benford has spent most of the past decade on finishing his very successful *Galactic Center* series, the final novel of which was *Sailing Bright Eternity* in 1995, his most highly acclaimed book remains *Timescape*, the 1980 novel that is considered perhaps the best SF novel portraying working scientists. With Benford's new novel, *Cosm*, he returns to the world of working physicists in a story that combines some of the best aspects of both *Timescape* and his excellent but greatly under-appreciated 1985 novel, *Artifact*.

Cosm takes place in 2005, and involves the accidental creation of a strange, shiny sphere the size of a basketball during a high-energy particle collider experiment. The protagonist and sole viewpoint character is a young, black, female experimental physicist from the University of California at Irvine named Alicia Butterworth.

The unexplainable sphere is created early in the novel during an unusual experiment at the Brookhaven National Laboratory's heavy ion collider in Long Island, an experiment for which Alicia, her post-doctoral assistant Zak, and graduate student Brad, have spent years preparing a special detector. The collider run is proceeding well, but when the other scientists go to lunch, the number of particle collisions starts to fall, and an explosion occurs that destroys their detector. Alicia and Zak find the strange, chrome-surfaced sphere in the debris of their detector, floating in a magnetic field. Before the other scientists return, they transfer the heavy sphere to a permanent magnet, hide it from the other scientists, and later have it shipped back to their lab in Irvine.

Alicia spends the rest of the novel trying to keep possession of the sphere so that she, Zak and Brad can collect data to characterize and explain it. The sphere exhibits bizarre characteristics. It is impervious, 100 kg in weight, and slightly warm to the touch, but emits UV radiation consistent with an object at 40,000 degrees. Moreover, these characteristics seem to be evolving with time. Unable to posit any theoretical explanations for their observations, Alicia makes a cold-call to a

Continued on page 97

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Lost in SOUND

Before *Star Wars*, before *Superman*, before *Jaws*, famed composer John Williams had yet another thrilling project to his credit, a cult TV show that just celebrated its 30th anniversary and is about to be the springboard for April's big budget motion picture — disaster king Irwin Allen's *Lost in Space*. Now GNP/Crescendo Records, the Hollywood-based company which has previously taken us on such nostalgia trips as *Time Tunnel*, *Land of the Giants*, *Quantum Leap* and *The Outer Limits*, sends us back to that fateful day on September 15, 1965, when CBS launched the most ambitious science fiction project ever attempted, costing even more than NBC's *Star Trek*. Eleven cuts capture John Williams' quirky melodies that helped bring to life the homeward search of the space family Robinson and the nefarious Dr. Zachary Smith. A pamphlet of photos and liner notes tell the behind-the-scenes story of how the show came to be. Says Billy Mumy, the show's Will Robinson and currently *Babylon 5*'s Lennier, "I think his work on the series ranks with some of the best work of his entire career." We think you'll agree. For

further information on this and any other of their science fictional releases, visit the manufacturer's website at <http://www.gnpcrescendo.com>, or call 1-800-654-7029.



In the CARDS

advent of the original *Star Trek* itself still seems like yesterday!) The cause for celebration is so great, in fact, that it might make you want to sit right down and write someone a letter. But better yet, why not scribble a note to your Klingon pals on one of the beautifully printed postcards produced just for that purpose by those Trekkers at Pocket Books in *Star Trek: The Next Generation Postcards* (\$8.00 U.S., \$11.00 Canadian). The thirty postcards included take you through not only the show's seven thrilling televised seasons, but they also beam you to images from the hit flicks *Star Trek Generations* and *Star Trek: First Contact*. Delight your correspondents with portraits of Patrick Stewart, Michael Dorn and the rest of the crew, as well as the posters from the blockbuster movies. And if you're too squeamish to detach the cards and actually mail them, we'll understand fully—the images make a miniature history in pictures of the show that brought the *Trek* TV franchise back from the dead. So why not buy two, one to keep and one to pull apart and mail to your Trekker friends across the galaxy? For further information, visit the publisher's website at www.startrekbooks.com.

It's hard to believe that the tenth anniversary of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* could really be here.

(For some of us older fans, the





First BORG

Fans agree that *Star Trek: First Contact* was the best *Trek* film to beam down in a long time. Since many of those same fans want to live the movie instead of merely watch it, Decipher, the Norfolk-based gaming company already responsible for the successful *Star Wars* and *Star Trek: TNG* collectible card games, has introduced *First Contact*, which turns the characters and events of that movie into a playable experience. Cards are available in foil-wrapped packs of nine, and in 30 pack boxes. The designers at Decipher have introduced not only new cards, but new aspects of gameplay as well, that not only are intriguing for their own sakes, but reinvigorate the existing cards from the *Star Trek* universe. For further information, check out the Decipher web site at www.decipher.com. You'll want to bookmark the site and visit often, for news on their upcoming games on *ST: Voyager* and *ST: Deep Space Nine*.



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Events on the HORIZON

Some big screen treats are about to pay a visit to your TV screen:

>Event Horizon: Lawrence Fishburne, Sam Neill and Kathleen Quinlan brought a touch of class to this SF thriller in the tradition of *Alien*. When the massive space ship *The Event Horizon* disappears on its maiden voyage, a search-and-rescue mission sent to follow-up stumbles into what the cast and crew referred to as "*The Shining* in space." Visual FX supervisor Richard Yuricich, who helped make such films as *2001: A Space Odyssey* and *Star Trek: The Motion Picture*, brings his special touch to this atmospheric space opera.

>Spawn: When comics creator Todd MacFarlane walked away from Marvel and DC Comics, he probably didn't suspect that his next creation, *Spawn*, would find its way to the movies. But his trained assassin turned devil spawn did make his way from comics to Hollywood, played by Michael Jai White, previously acclaimed for his role as Mike Tyson in a HBO movie. Also starring John Leguizamo and Martin Sheen.

>Contact: Though beaten out at the box office by *MIB*, *Contact* was the thinking person's hit of last summer. Carl Sagan's novel of an alien encounter proved to be

the springboard for a flick that pondered faith vs. science, and religion versus technology. Starring Jodie Foster, who should snare an Academy Award nomination out of her performance.

>Lolita 2000: Vladimir Nabokov is surely twirling in his grave at what his creation has wrought. While the big budget *Lolita* made by Adrienne Lynne and starring Jeremy Irons goes unreleased, Amazing Fantasy/Surrender Cinema brings you a tale from the future where sex is illegal.

Lolita is a monitor who is responsible for destroying unacceptable materials. Her work soon leads her to a discovery that alters her loyalty, and turns her into an underground sexual rebel.

>Mimic: Academy Award-winner Mira Sorvino heads an all-star cast in this tale of genetic engineering gone wrong. Three years after a team of scientists use recombinant DNA to defeat a viral epidemic, the newly created species called The Judas Breed has developed a life of

its own, and it isn't happy. Based on a short story by SF writer and editor Donald A. Wolheim, who later went on to found DAW Books.

>Kull the Conqueror: Kevin Sorbo, star of TV's *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys*, brings to life Robert E. Howard's other barbarian. A warrior king risks all to save his kingdom in this story of swords and sorcery. Special FX are supervised by Academy Award winner Kit West (*Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *Return of the Jedi*). Also available in widescreen and laserdisc versions.





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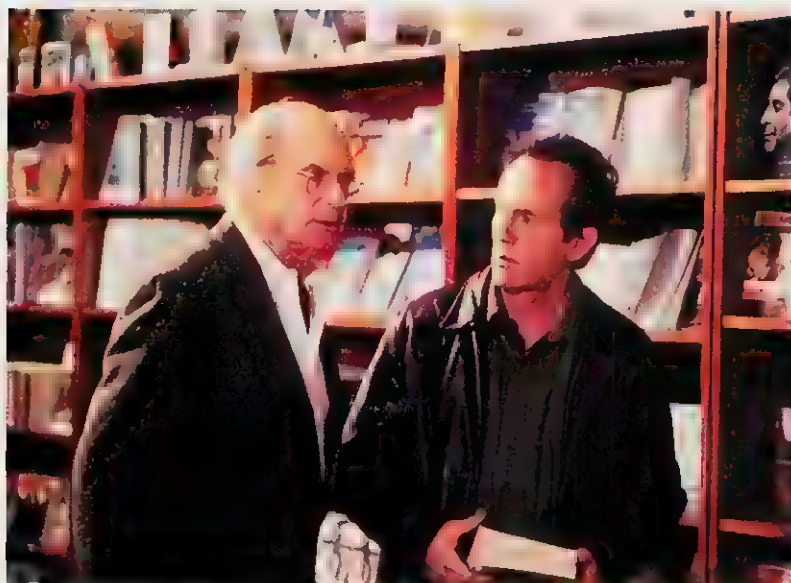
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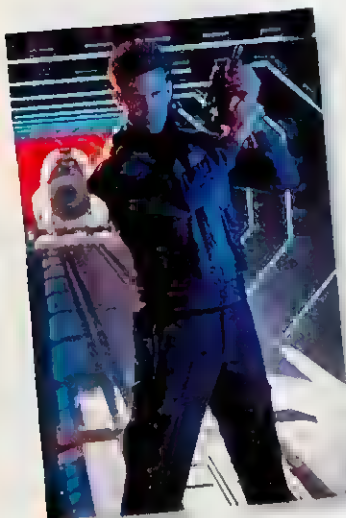
TELEVISION

By Dan Perez

It's time to chalk up TV's science fictional winners and losers.



Jose Chung might give *Millennium* (above) the boost it needs to last until the millennium, and a borg may help relaunch *Voyager*, but *Timecop* (below) just plain ran out of time.



THE COLORS OF AUTUMN HAVE GIVEN WAY TO the snows of winter (and the storms of El Niño), and the first killing frost has hit the fall television season. Some shows, hardy and well-established, are thriving, while others, undernourished and struggling, died on the vine. A few mainstays are definitely root-bound, and their future is in question, still. Here's my informal take on the fall season thus far.

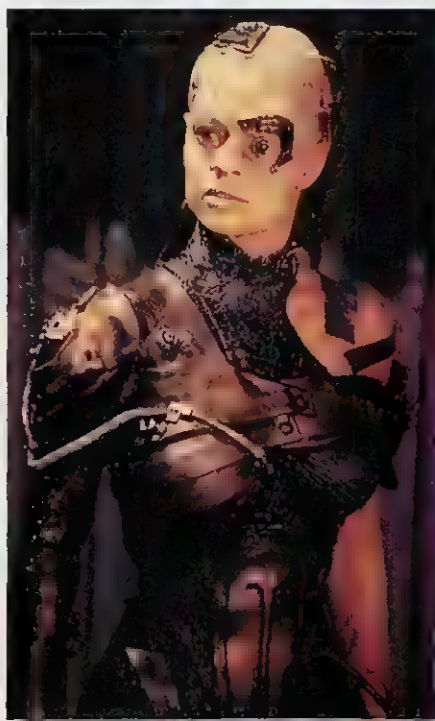
I admit to a bit of dismay that NBC canceled *Sleepwalkers* after only two episodes. I interviewed Abraham Benrubi (formerly of, and probably returning to, *ER*) a while back and in addition to being the soft-spoken nice guy you figured he would be, it turns out he's a big science fiction fan. He was excited to be appearing in an SF show, and though I thought the premise of *Sleepwalkers* had some built-in limitations, I wished him well. I don't even think his role became prominent until the third episode, and that's got to sting. Most likely, the cancellation had to do with a slow start and NBC's panic over watching its solid hit *Third Rock from the Sun* get steadily pummeled on Wednesday nights by ABC's powerhouse *The Drew Carey Show*. Does any show deserve cancellation after only two episodes?

And pity poor *Third Rock*. It started out strong on Thursday nights and, like *The X-Files*, had sufficient chops to move to Sunday nights without losing its ratings. So you have to wonder what NBC was thinking when they moved it to Wednesdays, squaring it off against *Drew Carey* (Carey went on record as a *Third Rock* fan, too, and wished the competition wasn't necessary). I guess someone at NBC had the bright idea that *Third Rock* would beat the pants off *Drew Carey* (Carey beat them to that punch with his *The Full Monty* number, I guess), and the plan seriously backfired. *Third Rock's* quirky quality hasn't fallen off perceptibly (Dick Solomon, Lord of the Dance, anyone?) but it's punch-drunk in the ratings, and NBC needs to get their show out of the ring and into a friendlier time slot.

Philosophers have pondered the duality of human nature, but what would they make of the duality of *Trek*? One the one hand, you've got *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, which just seems to get better and better. The station-bound setting has consistently provided a nexus for the sort of rich character interaction that was a hallmark of the original series and of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (which has made a satisfying transition to the big screen in *Star Trek: First Contact*). The DS9 ensemble has proven unusually strong and the recent Jem'Hadar/Cardassian/Dominion story arc has provided some interesting pairings and conflicts. Even a gimmick episode like "Trials and Tribble-ations" was a huge crowd pleaser (count me in—Terry Farrell voguing in her *Enterprise*-issue miniskirt was terrific). Add interesting aliens like Quark (Armin Shimerman) and Garak (Andrew Robinson), toss in a Worf and Dax marriage (the first between major characters in the franchise's 31-year history) and you've got some of the best

Trek going. One storm cloud on the horizon: Terry Farrell is currently engaged in a salary dispute with Paramount, and has not yet signed on for the next season.

And then there's *Star Trek Voyager*, still limping along, literally and figuratively trying to find its way. Initially, *Voyager's* premise sounded like a welcome return to ship-based *Trek*, but there was a serious flaw lurking there, too. With *Voyager* so far removed from the Federation, the show is deprived of the foundation upon which all the other *Trek* shows are built, and the infrastructure in which they thrive. And *Voyager's* transient nature makes it difficult for writers to set up extended story arcs. So





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CUT



The X-Files (above) picks up dramatic speed as it moves towards its cliffhanger season conclusion and movie debut, and the Babylon 5 gang (below) makes the move to TNT.

much of the show's tension is focused on returning to Federation space that the episodes suffer from what one pundit calls "Gilligan's Island Syndrome," in which the *Voyager* almost finds a way back, only to be thwarted by episode's end. And the technobabble-as-problem-solving—don't get me started.

Another problem is that *Voyager's* ensemble has never really achieved the critical mass of the *Deep Space Nine* gang, although characters like Janeway (Kate Mulgrew) and Chakotay (Robert Beltran) have been reliably good. *Voyager's* writers finally deemed the Kes character (played by Jennifer Lien) such a dead end that she was written off the show, to be replaced by the ultra-curvaceous Jeri Ryan as Borg babe Seven of Nine. To say that Ryan, spray-painted in spandex, caught the attention of *Voyager* viewers (and just about everyone else) is to understate bigtime. Some resentment that seemed like a crass ploy to rev up *Voyager's* sex appeal, and the inevitable puns and jokes like "Seven of Sixty-Nine" began to circulate. However, after a perhaps too-hasty assimilation (ahem) into the *Voyager's* regular crew, Ryan surprised viewers with smart, action-oriented performances, and ratings improved considerably. Seven of Nine has proven to be shot in the

arm, but can she save the ailing *Voyager*, or is more drastic surgery needed? Stay tuned.

To sum up my reaction to the fourth season of *Babylon 5*, I need only three letters: wow! Every time I think series creator J. Michael Straczynski can't crank the dramatic tension any tighter, and every time I think he's dangled one too many loose ends, he surprises me. I wasn't alone in thinking "how do you follow that?" when the Shadow War concluded so spectacularly, but Straczynski effortlessly shifted his focus to the compelling struggle between an independent *Babylon 5* and the corrupted, Nazi-like Earth Alliance. Instead of spider-legged aliens, the villains were humans, and Straczynski homed in on the troubling ambiguities of human warfare and alliance. And the covert evil of the Psi Corps, as personified by Bester (Walter Koenig), has never been so deliciously nasty. The terrific ensemble cast, particularly Peter Jurasik (Londo) and Andreas Katsulas (G'Kar), has never been better, although viewers were stunned by Claudia (Ivanova) Christian's abrupt departure from the show. Replacing her will be Tracy Scoggins as Captain Elizabeth Lochley, who will presumably command the station now that Sheridan (Bruce Boxleitner) has resigned his Earth Alliance commission.

Perhaps the biggest surprise of the season had to do with the show itself. TNT picked up the fifth and final season of *Babylon 5*, and will be showing the entire series beginning in January. This solves what had been the two biggest problems with *Babylon 5* to date: first off, many potential viewers complained that coming into the middle of the tightly-plotted story arc was just too confusing, but now that TNT is going to run the entire series again, it's an ideal opportunity for these people to see what they've been missing. Second, unlike syndicated PTEN, which constantly allowed *B5* to be pre-empted or run at different times and days each week, TNT will



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Xena continues to capture an audience of both sword & sorcery fans and feminists.

be running the show in a regular time slot and promoting it much more visibly, as well. In addition, TNT produced two TV-movie spinoffs from the show, which will bracket the series. I've said this before and I'll say it again: *Babylon 5* is, quite simply, the best science fiction you're going to find on television, so don't miss this chance to see the entire series from start to finish.

Most everyone agrees that the current season of *The X-Files* has been pretty good. If you're a fan of the Lone Gunmen, you got to find out their first names (and all I have to say is "Ringo?"). If you're a "shipper" (as in "relationshipper", internet slang for someone who wants to see Scully and Mulder get involved), you got teased when the agents danced together, smiling at each other—don't expect anything too hot and heavy, though. On the creepier side of the *Files*, Scully discovered she has a young daughter. Speculation on the conception method, the father and how long little Emily will survive (being a relative of Scully and all) is heating up the news-groups. As is, she stands to complicate the situation between Mulder and Scully (some fans think that perhaps *Mulder* is the father, via sinister artificial insemination on the part of the Consortium). *The X-Files* is zeroing in on its season finale cliffhanger, which will be resolved in the upcoming *X-Files* movie scheduled for June 1998. It looks certain that there will be a sixth season for the show, but the big question is: will Chris Carter still be helming? The truth is out there, but you'll have to wait for it.

The incredibly dark and moody *Millennium*, on the other hand, has been struggling to shed its image as one heck of a depressing show. Chris Carter has imported both Glen Morgan and James Wong from the *X-Files* to exec-produce. In addition, fan-revered writer Darin Morgan, who wrote some of the funniest, weirdest *X-Files* episodes you could possibly ask for,

has been tapped to do that voodoo he does so well for *Millennium*. His first script revived the character of eccentric novelist Jose Chung (Charles Nelson Reilly), who had previously debuted over in *X-land*. The episode was well received, and even featured a typically Morgan-esque cameo by David Duchovny (on a movie poster spoofing a certain Scientological movie star). Will all this X-ification of *Millennium* improve the series or turn it into a spin-off? Anything that lightens up Frank "Gloom-boy" Black (Lance Henriksen) will likely be an improvement, but the jury's still out.

Two shows catering to the youth market are rocking and rolling. ABC's *Sabrina, the Teenage Witch*, bouyed up by title star Melissa Joan Hart, is giving *Urkel* and *Family Matters* a run for their money, and over on WB, Sarah Michelle Gellar has sunk her teeth into *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, which is developing a growing fan base.

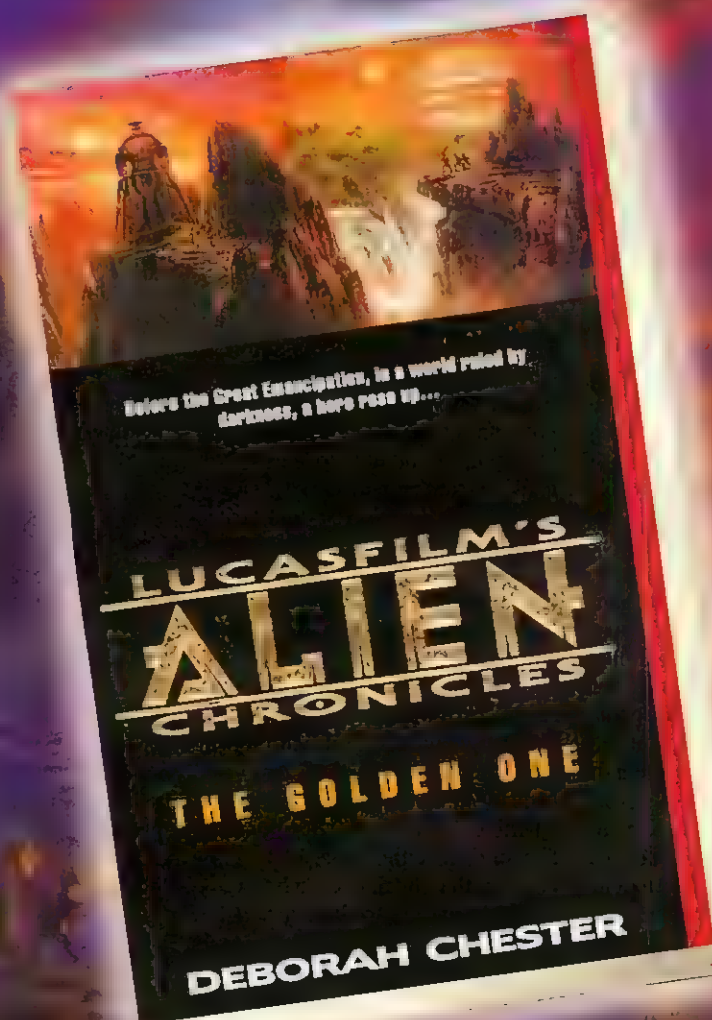
The cancellation axe has fallen on a few other shows besides *Sleepwalkers* already, including ABC's *You Wish* and *Timecop*, Fox's *The Visitor*, and the Sci Fi Channel's first original series, *Mission: Genesis*. Other shows are clinging by their fingers and toes, such as CBS's *Meego* and ABC's *Teen Angel* (*Brady Bunch* alum Maureen McCormick has already jumped ship from the latter).

Where do sci-fi shows go when they die? If enough episodes have been shot, chances are the Sci Fi Channel will pick up the show for reruns, or occasionally, as in the case of *Mystery Science Theater 3000* and the delightfully unstoppable *Sliders*, produce new episodes, as well. The Sci Fi Channel recently nabbed three defunct series, *Space: Above and Beyond*, *American Gothic* and *Earth II*, and I'm sure more will follow. Which is kind of neat, when you think about it, because if you actually liked a particular show, it's nice to see it revived. Sci-Fi Channel, I have just two words for you as this season winds down: *The Prisoner*. □

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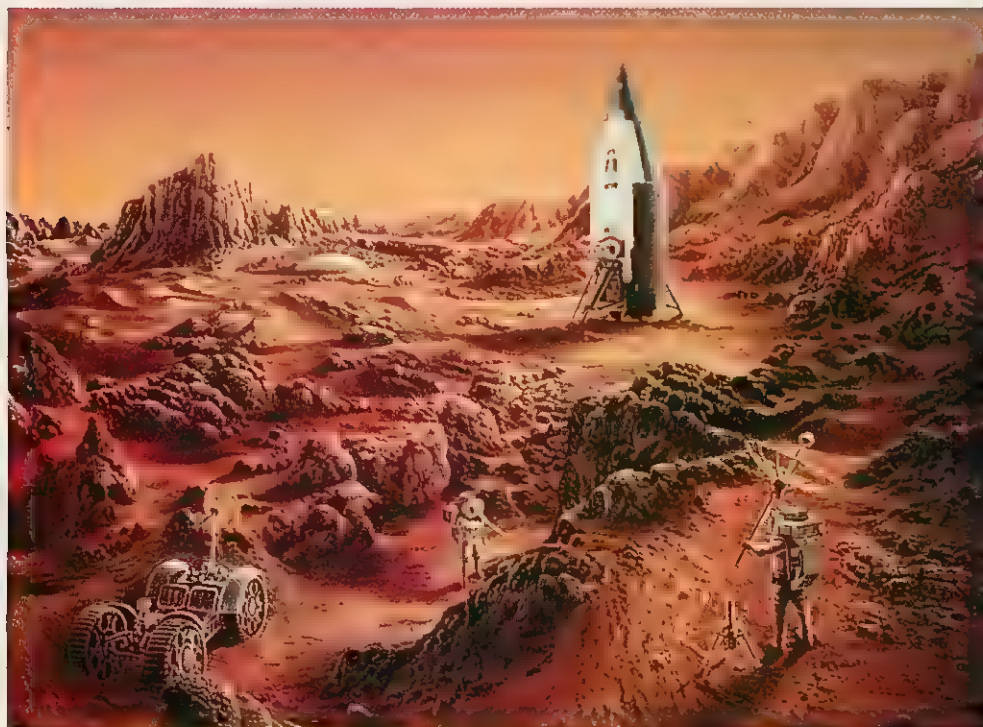
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Space scientists make the choice: Do we go to Mars or settle for the Moon?



ABOVE: Instead of returning to the Moon, some scientists say we should set our sights on Mars. (Art by Don Dixon)

WITH THE SUCCESS OF THE PATHFINDER MISSION and the launch of the Lunar Prospector, it is clear that it's time for a bold new leap forward into the universe. But where do we go? Back to the moon? On to Mars? This debate has become the defining question of the space program for the next millennium.

To address this question, our intrepid scientist/writer Geoffrey A. Landis ventured to Houston, Texas, to interview engineers and space scientists who were gathering to work out schemes to make use of the resources available in space. On behalf of *Science Fiction Age*, he managed to gather diverse opinions from some of the most well-known rocket scientists in the world: Michael Duke, former scientist for the Apollo project now working at the Lunar and Planetary Institute; Tom Meyer, the coordinator of the Case for Mars conference and one of the founding members of the legendary Mars Underground; David Criswell, lunar scientist and the advocate of a plan to use the moon as a solar-power satellite; David Kaplan, program manager for the NASA Mars In-Situ Propellant program; David Agresti, of the Department of Astro and Solar System Physics at the University of Alabama; John Marshall from NASA Ames, and Robert Zubrin, chairman of the National Space Society and author of the recent book *The Case for Mars*.

LANDIS: What should be our next target in space? Some people have been saying, let's go on to Mars; others say, return to the moon, this time to stay.

DUKE: The moon is a target for space exploration, but not in the way it was when we did Apollo. There are sci-

entific things to do on the moon that have not been done, but they tend not to rank at high priority in the scientific community, and that's why you see other missions getting priority. I think that the role of the moon is an economic role. That is good enough reason to continue to explore it. NASA's exploration program is dominated by the space science community, and they are not convinced that that's a useful thing to do, and besides that, it takes resources away from what they want to do, so they're not going to support it. On the other hand, I am an advocate of Mars exploration, but it seems to me I'm getting too old to anticipate sending humans to Mars in any reasonable time frame. I think that in terms of exploration, NASA is misdirected in spending its effort in going to Mars and ignoring the moon. Dan Goldin is leading the pack toward Mars, and has issued a number of challenges to NASA in order to go off in that direction. But

there are people in NASA who agree that we need to put more effort into lunar exploration. Sometimes it's sort of discouraging, because it would be nice to think that there was a logical plan for getting humans from where we are now out into the solar system, but you just have things like Apollo, or humans to Mars—little spurts of ideas and activities that people identify with.

LANDIS: Why do you think that the moon is economically interesting?

DUKE: The moon will be really economically interesting if we find water there. There's some possibility that you can find buyers of lunar water in other places in space, particularly for rocket propellant, but also for life support. Ultimately, the industrialization of space will require lunar resources. It will require materials of a wide variety—metals, non-metals—and it will require inexpensive transportation, and both of those can actually be accomplished from the moon. To support and develop industry in space, anything that requires large numbers of people in space like tourism, or things like building solar-power satellites, I believe that the moon will be essential in that.

LANDIS: I'll be the heretic here, and say, not the moon, and not Mars, but the moons of Mars. Deimos and Phobos are very interesting objects. They're tiny, almost asteroids—in fact, some scientists think that they are asteroids. In terms of the energy it takes to get there, it's easier to get to the moons of Mars than it is to get to either the surface of the moon or the surface of Mars. This is because they have so little gravity—you don't so much land on these moons, it's more like you nudge up against



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QUOTES & NOTES

"The State had use for an empty man." - *Rammer*
 "Killer geeks riding timestreams, biting the heads off vast chickens of probability." - *Under Siege*
 "Rosa claimed to know where the Seven Cities of Gold were. Right." - *Cibola*
 "The crew can't strike against smugglers! This is an illegal operation." - *Hollywood Kremlin*
 "The churten would allow a crew to travel in its own time without time dilation." - *The Shobies' Story*
 "It's like a boardgame run by machines." - *Slow Birds*
 "A lot of people are on their own. Infected with viruses that are virtually unique." - *Blood Sisters*
 "Don't fool yourself - this rescue mission was a political toy from the start" - *A Walk in the Sun*
 The planet Mercury was supposed to be boring, but investigative teams reported anomalies - *Cilia-of-Gold*
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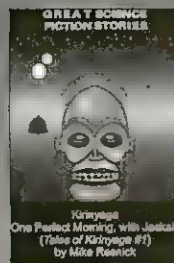
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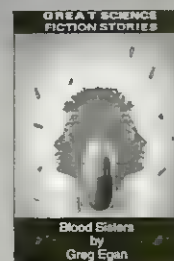
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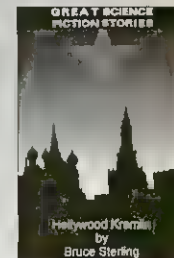
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them. And they have resources, too. It looks very likely that they have water, possibly ice, in their structure. And ice is rocket-fuel ore.

DUKE: In terms of economics, the problem is trip time. A round-trip to the moon only takes ten days. Look at the spacecraft system that will be needed to go to Mars and return, with chemical rockets or even with very efficient electric propulsion; look at the total mass you need and the amount of time that it takes. And then ask, for the same mass flow to low Earth orbit, what is the mass of spacecraft that you have to build? And what is the cost of getting that spacecraft into space? You'll find that you get a very much higher mass payback with the lunar system. Although the moons of Mars have some attraction because they've got some different stuff, and potentially some really valuable stuff, but they're just a little far away. The same thing for near-Earth asteroids—they're just fairly distant in terms of trip times.

MEYER: As a primary mission, I don't know whether the asteroids compete with the moon or Mars, but they're fairly easy to do. I'm all in favor of doing it, of getting some sample returns, particularly from some comets—I'm involved in the Stardust [comet sample return] mission, if only as a webmaster. There's a tremendous amount of information that we could gain from cometary material, which would help us understand the evolution of the planets, and also maybe give us some clues on the origin of life, particularly if we can get some information about the volatiles from comets. Volatiles are particularly delicate things, and we'd like to get them in pristine condition. The question of how life evolved and how it got to Earth, and whether it evolved on the planets or whether it came from extraterrestrial or interstellar transfer by panspermia, we'll get clues from investigating comets. So comet missions should be very high on our priority list. Notice I didn't say we should do it first. But comets are important.

LANDIS: Mike Duke just told us we ought to go to the moon. What's your opinion, the moon or Mars?

MEYER: I've always thought we should do both the moon and Mars. In a world of limited budgets, of course, it gets to be a competitive affair. The positive reason for going to Mars instead of the moon is that Mars has all the resources necessary to sustain life in some accessible form on the surface. Some argument can be made that one can find most of the same things on the moon, but you have to pay an awful lot more for it. The moon seems to be hydrogen short, a lot shorter than Mars, and hydrogen's probably the most valuable commodity for either program. You need resources because, particularly for Mars, you need to maintain self-sufficiency in the major consumables in order for a base to be practical. Many people who advocated moon bases have done so on the premise that they will be supporting further planetary exploration, and particularly that they produce fuel for a Mars

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mission. Bob Zubrin has the numbers to show why that's not a practical argument.

CRISWELL: I definitely think we should go to the moon. We know so much about it. The common resources are very well defined. There are challenges, but I don't think any fundamental mysteries, on using the bulk soil, using the separates in the soil, melting the soil, using it as glass, baking out the volatiles—we've already got a pretty good handle on what those are. And there are many schemes for chemical processing, perhaps using volatiles and components of the soil to let you close the loop. Smarts and solar energy in, and we start producing industrial feedstocks, basic materials that you need not only to produce specific products but to produce growing industrial capability, both in quality and in variety.

LANDIS: What about Tom Meyers' charge that the moon is hydrogen poor?

CRISWELL: It is hydrogen poor, especially compared to Earth. But that's great. Because I'm interested in large-area photovoltaics, and the last thing I want is a bunch of hydrogen going off to make water. The main challenge is not to keep doing what we've done on Earth, but to realize that we've got a new world there, a different world, and figure out how to make use of its unique properties. As barren as the moon looks, without an atmosphere, to me that makes it a great potential vacuum chamber and substrate for making integrated circuits. And we know that those are valuable. The most important thing about the moon is that you could use it as a base on which to build power stations, to take solar energy and collect it, reliably and dependably, and beam it back to Earth in the form of low-intensity beams of microwaves. Once you get up to a certain scale of production, this may be the lowest-cost source of electric power, and power at enormous flows, a hundred thousand gigawatts, conceivably even a million gigawatts—far, far more than we use right now.

LANDIS: This is the Solar Power Satellite concept, applied to the moon.

CRISWELL: Yes. Applied to the available, off-the-shelf satellite. Having been at this so long, I honestly believe that interest is starting to accrete in this idea. We're seeing it out of a few congressmen now, and a growing technical community. It's amazing how many really reputable people have provided the inputs to the technical base. It gives you a lot of confidence.

KAPLAN: There are clearly very compelling scientific reasons for returning to the moon. On the one hand there are compelling reasons for doing operations testing in a remote, hostile environment. But I think we've concluded that the moon is not on the critical path to a Mars mission. You don't give up going on an expedition to Mars if you're unable to test things on the moon, because the environments are very different. Look at the moon for the inherent value that lunar exploration has, and pursue the exploration for

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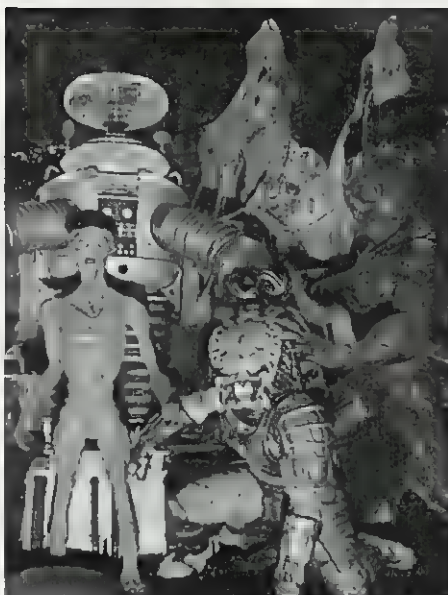
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those values, as opposed to blindly going back to the moon just because it seems to be a good idea before you send people on to Mars.

LANDIS: So what merits does the moon have?

KAPLAN: I think that the moon has great merits in its usefulness as an astronomical platform. By placing different types of telescopes, from radio telescopes to optical telescopes, on the stable platform that the moon offers on the back side, you shield those telescopes—particularly radio telescopes—from all the noise generated by Earth. That allows you great opportunities for some excellent cosmology work. Having a crew to provide routine maintenance could reduce the cost of facilities, because there's a big difference between a facility that you design to be visited once a year, versus one that's going to operate for twenty years by itself. So you can find good merits for having humans there. As well as the fact that we'd like to understand what the lunar composition and history is, and how that fits into the evolution of the Earth. So we need to go back and learn more about the moon.

LANDIS: And Mars?

KAPLAN: I think there are three compelling reasons why we want to do Mars exploration. The first is, to answer the question, did life evolve on Mars in the distant past? And perhaps a corollary, is life present today? Although the likelihood of that is far less. From the philosophic, theologic, and scientific points of view, addressing the question: is life unique to Earth or could it have evolved other places? I also believe that we're going to go to Mars to do comparative planetary. We know Mars in its very distant past was Earthlike. It was warmer, had a thicker atmosphere, water flowed. Many scientists have asserted that at the time life was evolving on Earth, the conditions on Mars may have been similar to Earth. Yet today Mars has evolved into a cold, barren, desolate world. And as we grapple with issues such as ozone depletion, greenhouse global warming, to be able to look at Mars and understand from its record how it evolved may shed tremendous insight into the natural evolution of a planetary structure, and therefore how we, as humans on this planet, could affect the way that our planet may be changing. And the third compelling reason, for me, is the expansion of the human species to another area. Every time we as a people have moved to new frontiers, they have compelled us to develop new technologies and new standards of living, and new ways of thinking that in a sense allowed us evolutionarily to take another step up. I'm convinced that outposts and subsequent colonies on Mars will do the same for the human species.

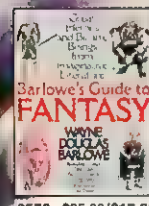
AGRESTI: It seems to me that if life did evolve on Mars, bacterial life, that the evidence on Earth compels you to believe that life still exists. Not on the surface, perhaps, but in those niches where there is warmth and there is water, if it ever was there it's still



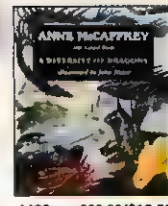
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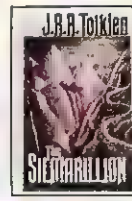
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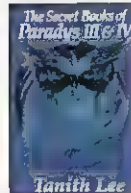
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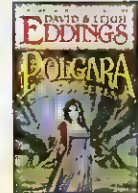
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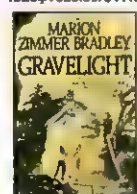
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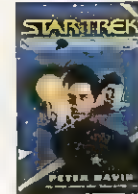
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got to be there. Unless it was such a catastrophic event that just wiped it all out at once. Consider subsurface thermal springs on Earth—hey, it's got to be there, if it ever was there. I would say it's almost obvious.

KAPLAN: I won't speculate. I would say that I've looked at the evidence that Dave McKay and his people put together [that a meteorite from Mars shows signs of life], and I find it to be very strong for there having been life.

MARSHALL: I think that our problem is that all our models are based on the assumption that we understand how life evolved on this planet, and we haven't got a clue. We keep saying Mars has a possibility for having evolved life because it may have been like Earth. Like Earth in what respect? Did life evolve at the bottom of the oceans, in the deep hydrothermal vents, under twelve thousand feet of water? There's nothing on Mars that was like that. So when we say Earth is like Mars, and therefore has a chance at having life, that's a non-sequiter. Unless you understand how life on Earth started, saying Mars is like Earth doesn't mean anything.

AGRESTI: We don't know one way or another.

ZUBRIN: We should go to Mars, because Mars is the new world. It's the only other planet in our solar system that has all the resources to support life, and not just life, but some day a new branch of civilization. And, in my view, the primary purpose of going into space is to extend human civilization into space, and to establish new branches of civilization on other bodies in space. Mars is by far the most favorable planetary body for that purpose.

LANDIS: What about the people who say we should go to the moon?

ZUBRIN: The notion that we need to go back to the moon prior to going to Mars represents a pathological example of how timid we have become over the years. For us today, the task of sending people to Mars is much easier than the task of going to the moon was in 1961, when Kennedy started the moon program. Almost forty years later, for us to say that a human to the moon program is the most reach that our grasp has, represents a remarkable degree of timidity, and a remarkable failure of will.

LANDIS: And asteroids?

ZUBRIN: Some of the Near-Earth asteroids are more interesting than the moon, in that they appear to have carbonaceous material and water on them, but compared to Mars, they're weak. Look, you've got to know, Mars is unique. It has water, lots of it, frozen in the form of ice and permafrost. It's got an atmosphere, with carbon dioxide and nitrogen. It has a nearly twenty-four hour day, which is needed to grow plants—they cannot adapt to two weeks of light, two weeks of dark, as in the lunar environment. It's atmosphere is thick enough to mask out the lethal effect of solar flares, so you can put greenhouses on the surface of Mars and not have your plants

killed by the flares. And, of course, it's an object of immense scientific interest, in terms of exploring to discover whether the processes which led to the origin of life on Earth were unique or common, in which case we'll find out whether the universe is filled with life. Mars is the key for us to find out whether we are alone in the universe. It's really worth finding out. It's not just a rock; it's a body with a surface area equal to the size of all the continents of Earth put together. And, the fact of the matter is, we are ready. We don't need to develop cheap access to orbit before we go to Mars. Even current launch costs of Atlases and Deltas would put the launch cost of the first human missions to Mars on the order of a couple of billion dollars. And, really, we don't need to do further robotic missions before we send people to Mars, although we should continue robotic exploration of Mars, in fact, we will have robotic orbiters going around Mars after there are human cities on Mars, just as we have them on Earth. But there's no need to have a large number more of them before we initiate human Mars exploration. We can simply continue in tandem. And a lunar base would be of no assistance whatsoever for sending people to Mars. The energy required to go from low Earth orbit to the surface of the moon is greater than that required to go from low Earth orbit to the surface of Mars, so that, far from being a useful refueling stop on the way to Mars, it would actually be more expensive to stop at the moon than to just go directly to Mars. And the building up of such a lunar base would not be free, it would be a massive logistic sink-hole, and delay us for years in obtaining our true objective. Fundamentally, you have to ask yourself, why are we going into space? Why is space of interest? If people just want to make money, there are plenty of ways to make money without going out into space. The reason why space is interesting is that a new branch of human civilization will be born. Ultimately, the reason why we need to go to Mars is not for us to get knowledge, for us to inspire students, for us to get inventions paid back to us. The reason why we need to go to Mars is for them. It's for the Martians, for the people who will live two hundred years from now. If we do proceed boldly, and open up Mars, establish a new branch of settlement on Mars, then two hundred years from now, there will be hundreds of millions of people living on Mars. They will have their own civilization, they will have their own culture, they will have added their own chapter to the human story. When they look back at our time, what that we do today will they consider to be of any significance? It certainly won't be our accomplishments in determining who was in power in Kuwait or in Nicaragua, or whether we had a national budget or health plan. But what we did to bring their civilization into being: that will be significant. Ultimately, that is why we do it.

We are not doing it for us. We are doing it for them. □

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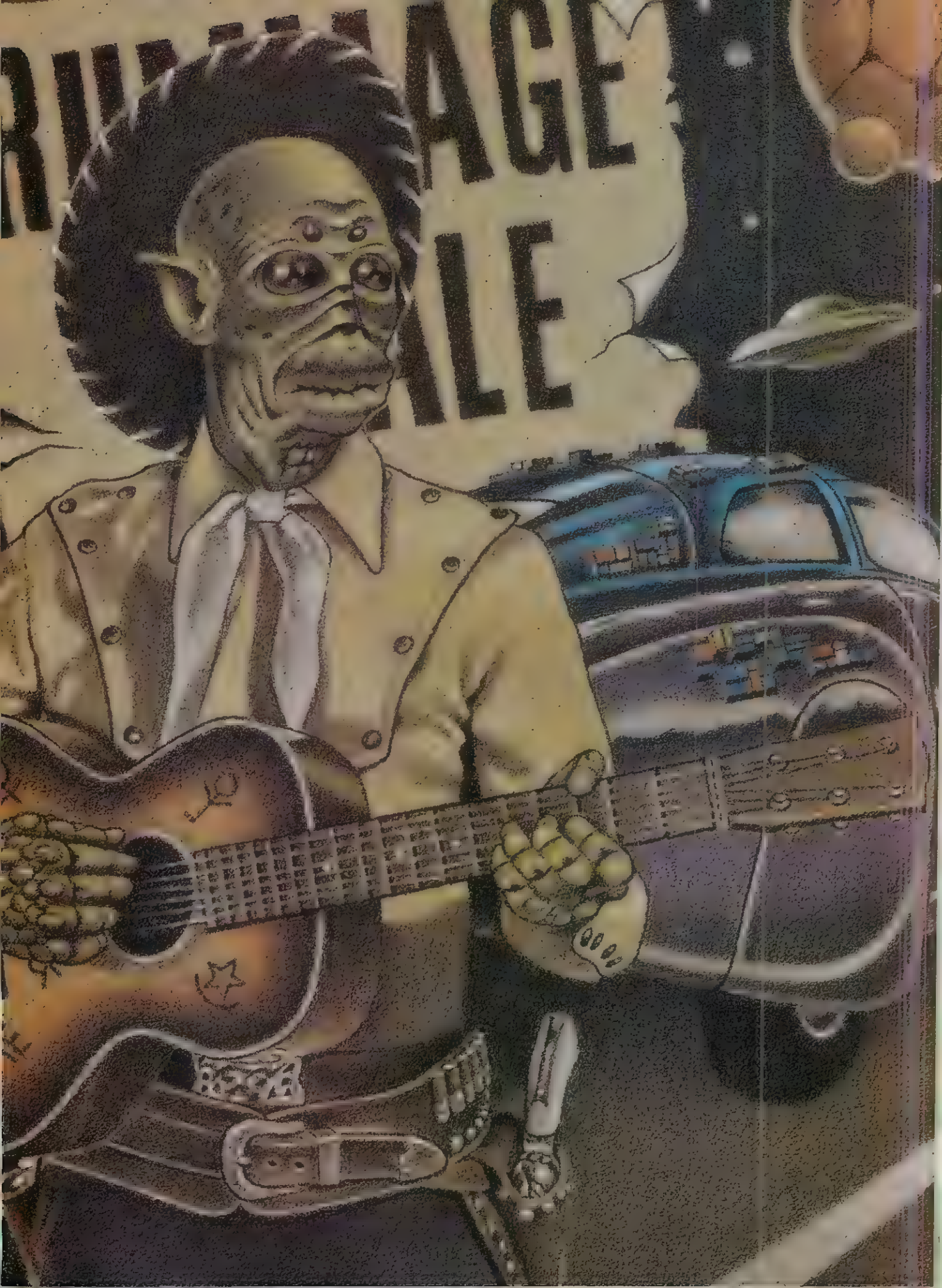
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THE ONLY THING ALIEN IS EXACTLY WHY THE
OTHERWORLDLY TOURISTS BOTHER TO KEEP VISITING.

CRA PHOUND

BY CORY DOCTOROW

Illustration by Chuck Demorat

Craphound had wicked yard-sale karma, for a rotten, filthy, alien bastard. He was too good at panning out the single grain of gold in a raging river of uselessness for me not to like him - respect him, anyway. But then he found the cowboy trunk. It was two months' rent to me and nothing but some squirrely alien kitsch-fetish to Craphound.

So I did the unthinkable. I violated the Code. I got into a bidding war with a buddy. Never let them tell you that women poison friendships: In my experience, wounds from women-fights heal quickly; fights with men over garbage leave nothing behind but scorched earth.

Craphound spotted the sign — his karma, plus the goggles in his exoskeleton, gave him the advantage when we were doing 80 kmh on some stretch of back-highway in cottage country. He was riding shotgun while I drove, and we had the radio tuned to the summer-Saturday programming: eight weekends with eight hours of old radio dramas: *The Shadow*, *Quiet Please*, *Tom Mix*, *The Crypt-Keeper* with Bela Lugosi. It was hour three, and Bogey was phoning in his performance on a radio adaptation of *The African Queen*. I had the windows of the old truck rolled down so that I could smoke without fouling Craphound's breather. My arm was hanging out the window, the radio was booming, and Craphound said "Turn around! Turn around, now, Jerry, now, turn around!"

When Craphound gets that excited, it's a sign that he's spotted a rich vein. I checked the side-mirror quickly, pounded the brakes, and spun around. The transmission creaked, the wheels squealed, and then we were creeping along the way we'd come.

"There," Craphound said, gesturing with his long, skinny arm. I saw it. A wooden A-frame real-estate sign, a piece of hand-lettered cardboard stuck overtop of the realtor's name:

EAST MUSKOKA VOLUNTEER FIRE DEPT
LADIES AUXILIARY RUMMAGE SALE
SAT 25 JUNE

"Hoo-eee!" I hollered, and spun the truck onto the dirt road. I gunned the engine as we cruised along the tree-lined road, trusting Craphound to spot any deer, signs, or hikers in time to avert disaster. The sky was a perfect blue and the smells of summer were all around. I snapped off the radio and listened to the wind rushing through the truck. Ontario is beautiful in the summer.

"There!" Craphound shouted. I hit the turn-off and down-shifted and then we were back on a paved road. Soon, we were rolling into a country fire station, an ugly brick barn. The hall was lined with long folding tables, stacked high. The mother lode!

Craphound beat me out the door, as usual. His exoskeleton is programmable, so he can record little scripts for it like: move left arm to door handle, pop it, swing legs out to running-board, jump to ground, close door, move forward. Meanwhile, I'm still making sure I've switched off the headlights and that I've got my wallet.

Two blue-haired grannies had a card table set up in front of the hall, with a big tin pitcher of lemonade and three boxes

of Tim Horton assorted donuts. That stopped us both, since we share the superstition that you always buy food from old ladies and little kids, as a sacrifice to the crap-gods. One of the old ladies poured out the lemonade while the other smiled and greeted us.

"Welcome, welcome! My, you've come a long way for us!"

"Just up from Toronto, ma'am," I said. It's an old joke, but it's also part of the ritual, and it's got to be done.

"I meant your friend, sir. This gentleman."

Craphound smiled without baring his gums and sipped his lemonade. "Of course I came, dear lady. I wouldn't miss it for the worlds!" His accent is pretty good, but when it comes to stock phrases like this, he's got so much polish you'd think he was reading the news.

The biddie blushed and giggled, and I felt faintly sick. I walked off to the tables, trying not to hurry. I chose my first spot, about halfway down, where things wouldn't be quite so picked-over. I grabbed an empty box from underneath and started putting stuff into it: four matched highball glasses with gold crossed bowling-pins and a line of black around the rim; an Expo '67 wall-hanging that wasn't even a little faded; a shoebox full of late '60s O-Pee-Chee hockey cards; a worn, wooden-handled steel cleaver that you could butcher a steer with.

I picked up my box and moved on: a deck of playing cards copyrighted '57, with the logo of the Royal Canadian Dairy, Bala Ontario printed on the backs; a fireman's cap with a brass badge so tarnished I couldn't read it; a three-story wedding-cake trophy for the 1974 Eastern Region Curling Championships. The cash-register in my mind was ringing, ringing, ringing. God bless the East Muskoka Volunteer Fire Department Ladies' Auxiliary.

I'd mined that table long enough. I moved to the other end of the hall. Time was, I'd start at the beginning and turn over each item, build one pile of maybes and another pile of definites, try to strategize. In time, I came to rely on instinct and on the fates, to whom I make my obeisances at every opportunity.

Let's hear it for the fates: a genuine collapsible top-hat; a white-tipped evening cane; a hand-carved cherry-wood walking stick; a beautiful black lace parasol; a wrought-iron lightning rod with a rooster on top; all of it in an elephant-leg umbrella-stand. I filled the box, folded it over, and started on another.

I collided with Craphound. He grinned his natural grin, the one that showed row on row of wet, slimy gums, tipped with writhing, poisonous suckers. "Gold! Gold!" he said, and moved along. I turned my head after him, just as he bent over the cowboy trunk.

I sucked air between my teeth. It was magnificent: a leather-bound miniature steamer trunk, the leather worked with lariats, Stetson hats, war-bonnets, and six-guns. I moved toward him, and he popped the latch. I caught my breath.

On top, there was a kid's cowboy costume: miniature leather chaps; a tiny Stetson; a pair of scuffed white leather cowboy boots with long, worn spurs affixed to the heels. Craphound moved it reverently to the table and continued to pull more magic from the trunk's depths: a stack of cardboard-bound Hopalong Cassidy 78s; a pair of tin six-guns with gunbelt and holsters; a silver star that said Sheriff; a bundle of Roy Rogers comics tied with twine, in mint condition; and a leather satchel filled with plastic cowboys and Indians, enough to reenact the Alamo.

"Oh, my God," I breathed, as he spread the loot out on the table.

"What are these, Jerry?" Craphound asked, holding up the 78s.

"Old records, like LPs, but you need a special record player to listen to them." I took one out of its sleeve. It gleamed, scratch-free, in the overhead fluorescents.

"I got a 78 player here," said a member of the East Muskoka Volunteer Fire Department Ladies' Auxiliary. She was short enough to look Craphound in the eye, a hair under five feet, and had a skinny, raw-boned look to her. "That's my Billy's things, 'Billy the Kid' we called him. He was dotty for cowboys when he was a boy. Couldn't get him to take off that fool outfit — nearly got him thrown out of school. He's

a lawyer now, in Toronto, got a fancy office on Bay Street. I called him to ask if he minded my putting his cowboy things in the sale, and you know what? He didn't know what I was talking about! Doesn't that beat everything? He was dotty for cowboys when he was a boy."

It's another of my rituals to smile and nod and be as polite as possible to the erstwhile owners of crap that I'm trying to buy, so I smiled and nodded and examined the 78 player she had produced. In lariat script, on the top, it said, "Official Bob Wills Little Record Player," and had a crude watercolor of Bob Wills and His Texas Playboys grinning on the front. It was the kind of record player that folded up like a suitcase when you weren't using it. I'd had one as a kid, with Yogi Bear silkscreened on the front.

Billy's mom plugged the yellowed cord into a wall jack and took the 78 from me, touched the stylus to the record. A tinny ukelele played, accompanied by horse-clops, and then a narrator with a deep, whisky voice said, "Howdy, Pardners! I was just settin' down by the ole campfire. Why don't you stay an' have some beans, an' I'll tell y'all the story of how Hopalong Cassidy beat the Duke Gang when they come to rob the Santa Fe."

In my head, I was already breaking down the cowboy trunk and its contents, thinking about the minimum bid I'd place on each item at Sotheby's. Sold individually, I figured I could get over two grand for the contents. Then I thought about putting ads in some of the Japanese collectors' magazines, just for a lark, before I sent the lot to the auction house. You never can tell. A buddy I knew had sold a complete packaged set of *Welcome Back, Kotter* action figures for nearly eight grand that way. Maybe I could buy a new truck...

"This is wonderful," Craphound said, interrupting my reverie. "How much would you like for the collection?"

I felt a knife in my guts. Craphound had found the cowboy trunk, so that meant it was his. But he usually let me take the stuff with street-value — he was interested in *everything*, so it hardly mattered if I picked up a few scraps with which to eke out a living.

Billy's mom looked over the stuff. "I was hoping to get twenty dollars for the lot, but if that's too much, I'm willing to come down."

"I'll give you thirty," my mouth said, without intervention from my brain.

They both turned and stared at me. Craphound was unreadable behind his goggles.

Billy's mom broke the silence. "Oh, my! Thirty dollars for this old mess?"

"I will pay fifty," Craphound said.

"Seventy-five," I said.

"Oh, my," Billy's mom said.

"Five hundred," Craphound said.

**It was
magnificent:
a leather-bound
miniature
steamer trunk,
the leather
worked with
lariats, Stetson
hats, war-
bonnets,
and six-guns.**

I opened my mouth, and shut it. Craphound had built his stake on Earth by selling a complicated biochemical process for nonchlorophyll photosynthesis to a Saudi banker. I wouldn't ever beat him in a bidding war. "A thousand dollars," my mouth said.

"Ten thousand," Craphound said, and extruded a roll of hundreds from somewhere in his exoskeleton.

"My Lord!" Billy's mom said. "Ten thousand dollars!"

The other pickers, the firemen, the blue-haired ladies, all looked up at that and stared at us, their mouths open.

"It is for a good cause," Craphound said.

"Ten thousand dollars!" Billy's mom said again.

Craphound's digits ruffled through the roll as fast as a croupier's counter, separated off a large chunk of the brown bills, and handed them to Billy's mom.

One of the firemen, a middle-aged paunchy man with a comb-over, appeared at Billy's mom's shoulder.

"What's going on, Eva?" he said.

"This . . . gentleman is going to pay ten thousand dollars for Billy's old cowboy things, Tom."

The fireman took the money from Billy's mom and stared at it. He held up the top note under the light and turned it this way and that, watching the holographic stamp change from green to gold, then green again. He looked at the serial number, then the serial number of the next bill. He licked his forefinger and started counting off the bills in piles of ten. Once he had ten piles, he counted them again. "That's ten thousand dollars, all right. Thank you very much, mister. Can I give you a hand getting this to your car?"

Craphound, meanwhile, had repacked the trunk and balanced the 78 player on top of it. He looked at me, then at the fireman.

"I wonder if I could impose on you to take me to the nearest bus station. I think I'm going to be making my own way home."

The fireman and Billy's mom both stared at me. My cheeks flushed. "Aw, c'mon," I said. "I'll drive you home."

"I think I prefer the bus," Craphound said.

"It's no trouble at all to give you a lift, friend," the fireman said.

I called it quits for the day, and drove home alone with the truck only half-filled. I pulled into the coach-house and threw a tarp over the load and went inside and cracked a beer and sat on the sofa, watching a nature show on a desert reclamation project in Arizona, where the state legislature had traded a derelict mega-mall and a custom-built habitat to an alien for a local-area weather-control machine.

The following Thursday, I went to the little crap auction house on King Street. I'd put my finds from the weekend

in the sale: lower minimum bid, and they took a smaller commission than Sotheby's. Fine for moving the small stuff.

Craphound was there, of course. I knew he'd be. It was where we met, when he bid on a case of Lincoln Logs I'd found at a fire-sale.

I'd known him for a kindred spirit when he bought them, and we'd talked afterward, at his place, a sprawling, two-story warehouse amid a cluster of auto-wrecking yards where the junkyard dogs barked, barked, barked.

Inside was paradise. His taste ran to shrines — a collection of '50s bar kitsch that was a shrine to liquor; a circular waterbed on a raised podium that was nearly buried under '70s bachelor pad-inalia; a kitchen that was nearly unusable, so packed it was with old barn-board furniture and rural memorabilia; a leather-appointed library straight out of a Victorian gentlemen's club; a solarium dressed in wicker and bamboo and tiki-idols. It was a hell of a place.

Craphound had known all about the Goodwills and the Sally Anns, and the auction houses, and the kitsch boutiques on Queen Street, but he still hadn't figured out where it all came from.

"Yard sales, rummage sales, garage sales," I said, reclining in a vibrating Naugahyde easy chair, drinking a glass of his pricey single-malt that he'd bought for the beautiful bottle it came in.

"But where are these? Who is allowed to have them?" Craphound

hunched opposite me, his exoskeleton locked into a coiled, semi-seated position.

"Who? Well, anyone. You just one day decide that you need to clean out the basement, you put an ad in the *Star*, tape up a few signs, and *voila* — yard sale. Sometimes, a school or a church will get donations of old junk and sell it all at one time, as a fundraiser."

"And how do you locate these?" he asked, bobbing up and down slightly with excitement.

"Well, there're amateurs who just read the ads in the weekend papers, or just pick a neighborhood and wander around, but that's no way to go about it. What I do is, I get in a truck, and I sniff the air, catch the scent of crap, and vroom! — I'm off like a bloodhound on a trail. You learn things over time: like stay away from Yuppie yard sales; they never have anything worth buying, just the same crap you can buy in any mall."

"Do you think I might accompany you some day?"

"Hell, sure. Next Saturday? We'll head over to Cabbagetown — those old coach houses, you'd be amazed what people get rid of. It's practically criminal."

"I would like to go with you next Saturday very much Mr. Jerry Abington." He used to talk like that, without commas or question marks. Later, he got better, but then, it was all one big sentence.

"Call me Jerry. It's a date, then. Tell you what, though: there's a Code you got to learn before we go out. The Craphound's Code."

"What is a craphound?"

"You're lookin' at one. You're one, too, unless I miss my guess. You'll get to know some of the local craphounds, you hang around with me long enough. They're the competition, but they're also your buddies, and there're certain rules we have."

And then I explained to him all about how you never bid against a craphound at a yard-sale, how you get to know the other fellows' tastes, and when you see something they might like you haul it out for them, and they'll do the same for you, and how you never buy something that another craphound might be looking for, if all you're buying it for is to sell it back to him. Just good form and common sense, really, but you'd be surprised how many amateurs just fail to make the jump to pro because they can't grasp it.

There was a bunch of other stuff at the auction, other craphounds' weekend treasures. This was high season,

when the sun comes out and people start to clean out the cottage, the basement, the garage. There were some collectors in the crowd, and a whole whack of antique and junk dealers, and a few pickers, and me, and Craphound. I watched the bidding listlessly, waiting for my things to come up and sneaking out for smokes between lots. Craphound never once looked at me or acknowledged my presence, and I became perversely obsessed with catching his eye, so I coughed and shifted and walked past him several times, until the auctioneer glared at me, and one of the attendants asked if I needed a throat lozenge.

My lot came up. The bowling glasses went for five bucks to one of the Queen Street junk dealers; the elephant-foot fetched \$350 after a spirited bidding war between an antique dealer and a collector — the collector won; the dealer took the top-hat for \$100. The rest of it came up and sold, or didn't, and at the end of the lot I'd made \$800, which was rent for the month plus beer for the weekend plus gas for the truck.

Craphound bid on and bought more cowboy things — a box of Super 8 cowboy movies, the boxes moldy, the stock itself running to slime; a Navajo blanket; a plastic donkey that dispensed cigarettes out of its ass; a big neon armadillo sign.

One of the other nice things about that place over Sotheby's, there was none of this waiting thirty days to get a check. I waited in line with the other pickers after the bidding was through, collected a wad of bills, and headed for my truck.

I spotted Craphound loading his haul into a minivan with handi-capped plates. It looked like some kind of fungus was growing over the hood and side-panels. On closer inspection, I saw that the body

had been covered in closely glued Legos.

Craphound popped the hatchback and threw his gear in, then opened the driver's side door, and I saw that his van had been fitted out for a legless driver, with brake and accelerator levers. A paraplegic I knew drove one just like it. Craphound's exoskeleton levered him into the seat, and I watched the eerily precise way it executed the macro that started the car, pulled the shoulder-belt, put it into drive, and switched on the stereo. I heard tape-hiss, then, loud as a b-boy cruising Yonge Street, an old-timey cowboy voice: "Howdy pardners! Saddle up, we're ridin'!" Then the van backed up and sped out of the lot.

I get into the truck and drove home. Truth be told, I missed the little bastard.

Some people said that we should have run Craphound and his kin off the planet, out of the Solar System. They said

that it wasn't fair for the aliens to keep us in the dark about their technologies. They say that we should have captured a ship and reverse-engineered it, built our own and kicked ass.

Some people!

First of all, nobody with human DNA could survive a trip in one of those ships. They're part of Craphound's people's bodies, as I understand it, and we just don't have the right parts. Second of all, they were sharing their tech with us — they just weren't giving it away. Fair trades every time.

It's not as if space was off-limits to us. We can, any one of us, visit their homeworld, just as soon as we figure out how. Only they wouldn't hold our hands along the way.

I spent the week haunting the "Secret Boutique," AKA the Goodwill As-Is Center on Jarvis. It's all there is to do between

yard sales, and sometimes it makes for good finds. Part of my theory of yard-sale karma holds that if I miss one day at the thrift shops, that'll be the day they put out the big score. So I hit the stores diligently and came up with crapola. I had offended the fates, I knew, and wouldn't make another score until I placated them. It was lonely work, and I missed Craphound's good eye and obsessive delight.

I was at the cash-register with a few items at the Goodwill when a guy in a suit tapped me on the shoulder.

"Sorry to bother you," he said. His suit looked expensive, as did his manicure and his haircut and his wire-rimmed glasses. "I was just wondering where you found that." He gestured at a rhinestone-studded ukelele, with a cowboy hat wood-burned into the body. I had picked it up with a guilty little thrill, thinking that Craphound might buy it at the next auction.

"Second floor, in the toy section."

"There wasn't anything else like it, was there?"

"Fraid not," I said, and the cashier picked it up and started wrapping it in newspaper.

"Ah," he said, and he looked like a little kid who'd just been told that he couldn't have a puppy. "I don't suppose you'd want to sell it, would you?"

I held up a hand and waited while the cashier bagged it with the rest of my stuff, a few old clothbound novels I thought I could sell at a used book-store, and a *Grease* belt-buckle with Olivia Newton John on it. I led him out the door by the elbow of his expensive suit.

"How much?" I had paid a dollar.

"Ten bucks?"

I nearly said, "Sold!" but I caught myself. "Twenty."

"Twenty dollars?"

"That's what they'd charge at a boutique on Queen Street."

He took out a slim leather wallet and produced a twenty. I handed him the uke. His face lit up like a lightbulb.

After the cowboy trunk episode, I didn't run into Craphound again until the annual Rotary Club charity rummage sale at

the Upper Canada Brewing Company. He was wearing the cowboy hat, six-guns, and the silver star from the cowboy trunk. It should have looked ridiculous, but the net effect was naive and somehow charming, like he was a little boy whose hair you wanted to muss.

I found a box of nice old melamine dishes, in various shades of green — four square plates, bowls, salad-plates, and a serving tray. I threw them in the duffel-bag I'd brought and kept browsing, ignoring Craphound as he charmed a salty old Rotarian while fondling a box of leather-bound books.

I browsed a stack of old Ministry of Labour licenses — barber, chiropodist, bartender, watchmaker. They all had pretty seals and were framed in stark green institutional metal. They all had different names, but all from one family, and I made up a little story to entertain myself, about the proud mother saving her sons' accreditations and framing and hanging them in the spare room with their diplomas. "Oh, George Junior's just opened his own barbershop, and little Jimmy's still fixing watches . . ."

I bought them.

In a box of crappy plastic Little Ponies and Barbies and Care Bears I found a leather Indian headdress, a wooden bow-and-arrow set, and a fringed buckskin vest. Craphound was still buttering up the leather books' owner. I bought them quick, for five bucks.

"Those are beautiful," a voice said at my elbow. I turned around and smiled at the snappy dresser who'd bought the uke at the Secret Boutique. He'd gone casual for the weekend, in an expensive, L.L. Bean button-down way.

"Aren't they, though?"

"You sell them on Queen Street? Your finds, I mean?"

"Sometimes. Sometimes at auction. How's the uke?"

"Oh, I got it all tuned up," he said, and smiled the same smile he'd given me when he'd taken hold of it at Goodwill. "I can play 'Don't Fence Me In' on it." He looked at his feet. "Silly, huh?"

"Not at all. You're into cowboy things, huh?" As I said it, I was overcome with the knowledge that this was 'Billy the Kid,' the original owner of the cowboy trunk. I don't know why I felt that way, but I did, with utter certainty.

"Just trying to re-live a piece of my childhood, I guess. I'm Scott," he said, extending his hand.

Scott? I thought wildly. *Maybe it's his middle name?* "I'm Jerry."

The Upper Canada Brewery sale has many things going for it, including a beer garden where you can sample their wares and get a BBQ burger. We gently gravitated to it, looking over the tables as we went.

"You're a pro, right?" he asked after we had plastic cups of beer.

"You could say that."

"I'm an amateur. A rank amateur. Any words of wisdom?"

I laughed and drank some beer, lit a cigarette. "There's no secret to it, I think. Just diligence: you've got to go out every chance you get, or you'll miss the big score."

He chuckled. "I hear that. Sometimes, I'll be sitting in my office, and I'll just know that they're putting out a piece of pure gold at the Goodwill and that someone else will get to it before my lunch. I get so wound up, I'm no good until I go down there and hunt for it. I guess I'm hooked, eh?"

"Cheaper than some other kinds of addictions."

"I guess so. About that Indian stuff — what do you figure you'd get for it at a Queen Street boutique?"

I looked him in the eye. He may have been something high-powered and cool and collected in his natural environment, but just then, he was as eager and nervous as a kitchen-table poker-player at a high-stakes game.

"Maybe fifty bucks," I said.

"Fifty, huh?" he asked.

"About that," I said.

"Once it sold," he said.

"There is that," I said.

"Might take a month, might take a year," he said.

"Might take a day," I said.

"It might, it might." He finished his beer. "I don't suppose you'd take forty?"

I'd paid five for it, not ten minutes before. It looked like it would fit Craphound who, after all, was wearing Scott/Billy's own boyhood treasures as we spoke. You don't make a living by feeling guilty over eight hundred percent markups. Still, I'd angered the fates, and needed to redeem myself.

"Make it five," I said.

He started to say something, then closed his mouth and gave me a look of thanks. He took a five out of his wallet and handed it to me. I pulled the vest and bow and headdress from my duffel.

He walked back to a shiny black Jeep with gold detail work, parked next to Craphound's van. Craphound was building onto the Lego body, and the hood had a miniature Lego town attached to it.

Craphound looked around as he passed, and leaned forward with undisguised interest at the booty. I grimaced and finished my beer.

It's not that my adulthood is particularly unhappy. Likewise, it's not that my childhood was particularly happy.

There are memories I have, though, that are like a cool drink of water. My grandfather's place near Milton, an old Victorian farmhouse, where the cat drank out of a milk-glass bowl; and where we sat around a rough pine table that, in my memory, is as big as my whole apartment; and where my playroom was the drafty old barn with hay-filled lofts bulging with old farm junk and Tarzan-ropes I could swing on.

There was Grampa's friend Fyodor, and we took a trip out to his wrecking-yard every evening so that he and Grampa could talk and smoke on the porch while I scampered around in the twilight, scaling mountains of auto-junk. The glove-boxes yielded treasure troves: crumpled photos of college boys mugging in front of tourist signs, roadmaps of faraway places, other things. I found a guidebook from the 1964 New York World's Fair, once. And a lipstick like a chrome bullet, and a pair of white leather ladies' gloves.

Fyodor dealt in scrap, too, and once he had half of a camy carousel, a few horses and part of the canopy, paint flaking and sharp torn edges protruding; next to it, a Korean-war tank minus its turret and caterpillar treads, and inside the tank were peeling old pinup girls and a rotation schedule and a crudely sketched Kilroy. The control-room in the middle of the carousel had a stack of paperback sci-fi novels with lurid covers, Ace Doubles that had two books bound back-to-back, and when you finished the first, you turned it over and read the other. Fyodor let me keep them, and there was a pawn ticket in one from Macon, Ga, for a transistor radio.

My parents left me alone in the house when I got old enough, fourteen or fifteen, and then I couldn't keep myself from sneaking into their room and snooping. Mom's jewelry box had books of matches from the Acapulco hotel where they'd honeymooned, printed with a bad palm-tree motif, and the matches had green heads and wooden bodies, though they were bound like paper matches. My Dad kept an old photo in his sock drawer, of himself on muscle beach, shirtless, flexing his biceps, and he had a silver turnip pocket-watch that had his grandfather's initials engraved on the front.

My grandmother saved every scrap of my mother's life in her basement, in dusty old Army trunks. I entertained myself endlessly by pulling them out and taking it in: her Mouse Ears from the big family train trip to Disneyland in '57, and her record albums, and the glittery pasteboard sign from her sweet sixteen. There were endless photo albums, and well-chewed stuffed animals, and school exercise books in which she'd practiced variations on her signature for page after page.

It all told a story. The penciled Kilroy in the tank made me see one of those Canadian soldiers in Korea, unshaven and crew cut like an extra on M*A*S*H, sitting bored hour after hour, staring at the pinup

It looked like some kind of fungus was growing over the hood and side-panels. On closer inspection, I saw that the body had been covered in closely glued Legos.

girls, fiddling with a crossword, finally laying it down and sketching his Kilroy quickly, before anyone saw.

The photo of my Dad posing sent me whirling through time to Toronto's old Muscle Beach in the east end, near Kew Beach, and hearing the tinny AM radios playing weird old psychedelic rock while teenagers lounged on their Mustangs and the girls sunbathed in bikinis that made their tits into torpedoes.

It all made poems. The old pulp novels and the pawn ticket, when I spread them out in the living-room in front of the TV, and arranged them just so, they made up a poem that could take my breath away.

They say that when my Mom was a kid, little kids imagined their dream-houses in obsessive, hyperreal clarity. That they knew what kind of dog they'd have, and what kind of fridge, and what kind of sofa, and what kind of endtables and what kind of husband, and how many kids they'd have and what they'd name them and what they'd wear.

I must've inherited the gene. I'd walk into our kitchen and just stand in the center of the linoleum, and think about what was missing — the curtains, for example, should be more like Grandma's, with bright floral prints. And there was a stove in Fyodor's yard that he used as a work-bench, an old cast-iron gas-fired piece from a Deco diner, that had elegant ivory knobs and a grill big enough to cook thirty burgers on at once. That would nicely replace the greenish electric stove we had.

And our glasses were all wrong: Grampa had milk-glasses with Li'l Orphan Annie, and Grandma's place had anodized aluminum cups in bright metallic colors that were so cold when you filled them with chocolate milk.

A restaurant we'd eaten at once while on a camping trip had a mahogany-paneled lounge with solid, lion's-footed horsehair sofas. They'd look great in the living-room, especially with cutglass and chrome tablelamps.

Our garage had nothing but tools and bikes and spare tires. It should have had tin signs advertising nickel bottles of Coca Cola, and Burma Shave, and patented quack remedies with hand-painted smiling babies endorsing them.

The shed shouldn't have been a Sear's prefab tin special — it should have been peeling old boards, with rickety wooden shelves inside and sawdust on the floor, and oiled iron tools on the walls.

I knew what was wrong with every square inch of my bedroom. I needed some old patchwork quilts to sleep under, instead of the synthetic-filled comforter, and my desk should have been a salvaged steel office desk with a worn green blotter and a solid oak chair on brass wheels. The basketball-hoop light fixture had to go, and in its place I wanted wall sconces made from brutally simple wrought iron rings with blown-glass shades.

The bathroom needed a bookcase. The books needed to be old and leather bound, swollen with the damp of a thousand showers, dog-eared and much-annotated.

I live in an apartment almost west enough to be in High Park. I've got two bedrooms at the top of the three-story house that was once a Victorian but was rebuilt after a fire in the mid-'70s. It's nice enough, in a generic, post-war kind of way.

It has a tremendous plus going for it: a coach-house out back that I pay another hundred bucks a month for. It's where I store my treasures, and there are three locks on the door.

The apartment came furnished in no-taste Late Canadian Thrift Store, and I never got around to redecorating it, strangely enough.

What I did do, though, was hang three long shelves at the foot of my bed. That's all the space I have to keep treasures on. It's a self-regulating mechanism, preventing me from sampling too much of the merchandise. If I find a piece that I have to keep, something from the shelf has to be moved out to the coach-house and taken away to an auction or a consignment store.

I have a milk-glass bowl on the shelves; a Made-in-Occupied-Japan tin tank that is pieced together from old tuna cans and hand-painted; a mint-condition Ace Double with bug-eyed monsters on both covers; a souvenir ashtray from the 1964 World's Fair; four anodized aluminum cups in brilliant metallic colors; a set of pink Mouse-Ears with a girl's name stitched in cursive writing on the reverse; a silver turnip pocket watch; a small postcard with a 3-D Jesus who winks at you when you move your head; a lighter made from burnished shrapnel; other treasures that come and go.

Over the years, I've found the steel desk and the wall sconces and carousel animals and tin Coca-Cola signs galore. Finding them feels right, like I've checked off an item on a checklist. They go straight into my garage without gracing my apartment even once, and selling them is never painful — it's touching them again, just once, having them pass through my possession that makes it good.

When I can't bring myself to switch on the TV, I take an armload of things down from my shelves and sit on the living room floor and spread them out in front of me and see if I can't make a poem. Sometimes I laugh and sometimes I cry, but usually I just stare at them and let my mind caress each piece and match it up with a memory.

I met Scott/Billy three times more at the Secret Boutique that week. He was a lawyer, and specialized in alien technology patents.

He had a practice on Bay Street, with two partners, and despite his youth, he was the senior man.

I didn't let on that I knew about Billy the Kid and his mother in the East Muskoka Volunteer Fire Department Ladies' Auxiliary. But I felt a bond with him, as though we shared an unspoken secret. I pulled any cowboy finds for him, and he developed a pretty good eye for what I was after and returned the favor.

The fates were with me again, and no two ways about it. I took home a ratty old Oriental rug that on closer inspection was a 19th-century hand-knotted Persian; an upholstered Turkish footstool; a collection of hand-painted silk Hawaiiana pillows and a carved Meer-schaum pipe. Scott/Billy found the last for me, and it cost me two dollars. I knew a collector who would pay thirty in an eye-blink, and from then on, as far as I was concerned, Scott/Billy was a fellow Craphound.

"You going to the auction tomorrow night?" I asked him at the checkout line.

"Wouldn't miss it," he said. He'd barely been able to contain his excitement when I told him about the Thursday night auctions and the bargains to be had there. He sure had the bug.

"Want to get together for dinner beforehand? The Rotterdam's got a good patio."

He did, and we did, and I had a glass of framboise that packed a hell of a kick and tasted like fizzy raspberry lemonade; and doorstopper fries and a club sandwich.

I had my nose in my glass when he kicked my ankle under the table.

"Look at that!"

It was Craphound in his van, cruising for a parking spot. The Lego village had been joined by a whole postmodern spaceport on the roof, with a red-and-blue castle, a football-sized flying saucer, and a clown's head with blinking eyes.

I went back to my drink and tried to get my appetite back.

"Was that an extee driving?"

"Yeah. Used to be a friend of mine."

"He's a picker?"

"Uh-huh." I turned back to my fries and tried to kill the subject.

"Do you know how he made his stake?"

"The chlorophyll thing, in Saudi Arabia."

"Sweet!" he said. "Very sweet. I've got a client who's got some secondary patents from that one. What's he go after?"

"Oh, pretty much everything," I said, resigning myself to discussing the topic after all. "But lately, the same as you — cowboys and Injuns."

He laughed and smacked his knee. "Well, what do you know? What could he possibly want with the stuff?"

"What do they want with any of it? He got started one day when we were cruising the Muskokas," I said carefully, watching his face. "Found a trunk of old cowboy things at a rummage sale. East Muskoka Volunteer Fire Department Ladies' Auxiliary." I waited for him to shout or startle. He didn't.

"Yeah? A good find, I guess. Wish I'd made it."

I didn't know what to say to that, so I took a bite of my sandwich.

Scott continued. "I think about what they get out of it a lot. There's nothing we have here that they couldn't make for themselves. I mean, if they picked up and left today, we'd still be making sense of everything they gave us in a hundred years. You know, I just closed a deal for a biochemical computer that's 10,000 times faster than anything we've built out of silicon. You know what the extee took in trade? Title to a defunct fairground outside of Calgary — they shut it down ten years ago because the midway was too unsafe to ride. Doesn't that beat all? This thing is worth a billion dollars right out of the gate, I mean, within twenty-four hours of the deal closing, the seller can turn it into the GDP of Bolivia. For a crummy real-estate dog that you couldn't get five grand for!"

It always shocked me when Billy/Scott talked about his job — it was easy to forget that he was a high-powered lawyer when we were jawing and fooling around like old craphounds. I wondered if maybe he wasn't Billy the Kid; I couldn't think of any reason for him to be playing it all so close to his chest.

"What the hell is some extee going to do with a fairground?"

Craphound got a free Coke from Lisa at the check-in when he made his appearance. He bid high, but shrewdly, and never pulled \$10,000 stunts. The bidders were wandering the floor, pre-viewing the week's stock, and making notes to themselves.

I rooted through a box-lot full of old tins, and found one with a buckaroo at the Calgary Stampede, riding a bucking bronc. I picked it up and stood to inspect it. Craphound was behind me.

"Nice piece, huh?" I said to him.

"I like it very much," Craphound said, and I felt my cheeks flush.

"You're going to have some competition tonight, I think," I said, and nodded at Scott/Billy. "I think he's Billy; the one whose mother sold us — you — the cowboy trunk."

"Really?" Craphound said, and it felt like we were partners again, scoping out the competition. Suddenly I felt a knife of shame, like I was betraying Scott/Billy somehow. I took a step back.

"Jerry, I am very sorry that we argued."

I sighed out a breath I hadn't known I was holding in. "Me, too."

"They're starting the bidding. May I sit with you?"

And so the three of us sat together, and Craphound shook Scott/Billy's hand and the auctioneer started into his harangue.

It was a night for unusual occurrences. I bid on a piece, something

Continued on page 96

The Entities descended
and effortlessly stole Earth's Freedom.
The Colonel would risk everything
to get that freedom back.

THE COLONEL IN AUTUMN

BY ROBERT SILVERBERG

HALF PAST NINE IN the morning, and Colonel Anson Carmichael III, whom everyone usually called just "the Colonel," stood before his television set, gaping in disbelief. His daughter Rosalie had phoned to tell him to turn it on. That would not have occurred to him. The television was here for the grandchildren, not for him. But there he was, now, a lean, long-legged, resolutely straight-backed and stiff-necked retired army officer in his early sixties with piercing blue eyes and a full head of white hair, gaping like a kindergarten kid at his television set in the middle of the morning.

The same two stupefying scenes had been showing on every channel, over and over, for the past fifteen minutes. One was the aerial shot of the fire on the northwestern flank of the Los Angeles basin: black billowing clouds, vivid red tongues of flame, an occasional glimpse of a house on fire, or a whole row of houses. The other was the grotesque, unbelievable, even absurd sight of half a dozen titanic alien beings moving solemnly around in the parking lot of a huge shopping mall, with the sleek slender shaft of what he supposed was an alien ground vehicle of some sort rearing up like a shining needle behind them out of a tumbled cluster of charred cars.

And, over and over, the same string of words kept running through the Colonel's mind:

This is an invasion. We are at war.

Huge catastrophic fires were an ugly part of California life, but they were inevitable in a place that had, as a normal feature of the climate, a dry season lasting from April to November every year. October was the fire month, when the grassy hills were bone-dry and the diabolical Santa Ana winds came roaring up out of the desert to the east. There was never a year without its batch of fires.

But this other thing — alien spaceships landing in Los Angeles, and, so it seemed, touching down also in at least a dozen other places around the world — bizarre visitors, very likely hostile and belligerent, coming without warning — intruding, God only knew why, on the generally peaceful and prosperous place that was the planet Earth in the early years of the twenty-first century....

That hammered at your sense of the orderly structure of the world, of the predictable flow of the events of life. It was science-fiction suddenly real.

The Colonel had read only one science fiction book in his life, *The War of the Worlds*, Wells, long ago. It was intelligent and entertaining, but ultimately it had annoyed him, because it asked an interesting question: *What do you do when you find yourself up against an utterly unbeatable enemy?* — and then had supplied no useful answer. The Martian conquest of Earth had been thwarted not by any kind of clever military strategy but only by the merest of flukes, a convenient biological accident.

He didn't mind tough questions, but he believed in trying to find good answers for them, and he had been expecting Wells to supply something more than having the invincible Martian conquerors succumb to unfamiliar Earthly disease bacteria even as the armies of Earth lay helpless before their advance. That was ingenious, but it wasn't the right kind of ingenuity, because it left no scope for human mental ability or courage; it was simply a case of one external event cancelling out another, like a tremendous downpour suddenly showing up to extinguish a raging forest fire while all the firefighters stood around sucking their thumbs.

And now here was Wells' book come to life. Aliens coming out of nowhere — what had happened to our orbital early warning systems, the space-based telescopes that were supposed to be scanning for incoming asteroids and other little cosmic surprises? — and, if what was on TV was any fair sample, they were already strutting around very much like conquerors.

It remained to be seen, of course, what these invaders wanted. Maybe this wasn't even an invasion, but just an embassy that had arrived in a singularly clumsy way.

Already the Colonel's mind was beginning to tick through a litany of options, wondering about which people he needed to call in Washington, wondering whether any of them would call him. If indeed there was going to be war against these aliens, and he was intuitively certain that there would be, he intended to play a part in it.

The Colonel had no love for war and very little eagerness to become involved in it, and not just because he had been retired from the armed services for close to a dozen years. He had never glamorized war. War was a nasty, stupid, ugly business, usually signifying

nothing more than the failure of rational policy. His father, Anson II, the Old Colonel, had fought — and fought plenty, and had the scars to show for it — in the Second World War, and nevertheless had raised his three sons to be soldiers. The Old Colonel had liked to say, "People like us go into the military in order to see to it that nobody will ever have to fight again."

Sometimes, though, you simply had war thrust upon you without any choice, and then it was necessary to fight or be obliterated. This looked like one of those times. In that case, retired though he was, he might have something to offer. The psychology of alien cultures, after all, had been his big specialty from his Vietnam days onward, although he had never imagined having to deal with a culture as alien as *this*. But still, there were certain general principles that probably would apply, even in this case

Abruptly the repetitiousness of the stuff they were showing on the screen began to irritate and anger him. He went back outside.

As the Colonel emerged onto the patio he felt the wind coming hard out of the east, a hot one, stronger than it had been earlier that morning, with a real edge on it. He could hear the ominous whooshing sound of fallen leaves, dry and brittle, whipping along the hillside just below the main house. East winds always meant trouble. Already there was a faint taste of smoke in the air.

The ranch was situated on gently sloping land on the south side of the mountains behind Santa Barbara. The air here was almost always clear and pure, the sky extended a million miles in every direction, the sight-lines were spectacular. The land had been in the Colonel's wife's family for a hundred years; but she was gone now, leaving him to look after it by himself.

His had always been a military family. The Colonel's late father Anson II, the Old Colonel, had had three boys. One of them, Mike, who had been a Navy pilot, had wound up in L.A., right there in the belly of the beast. Lee, the baby of the family — he was dead now, killed ten years back testing an experimental fighter plane — had lived out in Mojave, near Edwards Air Force Base. And here was the oldest son, Anson III, stern and straight and righteous, once called the Young Colonel to distinguish him from his father but now no longer young, retired and dwelling placidly on a pretty ranch high up on a mountain in back of Santa Barbara.

From the porch of the main house, Colonel Carmichael had vast unimpeded views. He had a tremendous angle eastward over the low mountains of the coastal range to Ventura and Oxnard, and sometimes even caught hints of the grayish-white edge of the smog wall that boiled up into the sky out of Los Angeles itself, 90 miles away.

Today, though, a great brownish-black column was climbing toward the stratosphere out of the fire zone down there. As it hit the upper air it turned blunt and spread laterally, forming a dismal horizontal dirty smear across the middle of the sky.

Whole towns must be going up in flames! He wondered about his brother Mike, right there in the middle of the city: whether he was okay, whether the fire was threatening his neighborhood at all. The Colonel reached tentatively for the phone at his hip. Mike was usually part of the volunteer airborne fire-fighting crew that went up to dump chemicals on fires like this. He had gone to New Mexico last week; but if he was back, he was in all likelihood up there right now fluttering around in some rickety little plane.

If he wasn't back, though, the Colonel would probably just get Mike's wife Cindy on the phone. He didn't enjoy talking to her. Cindy was too aggressively perky, too emotional, too goddamned *strange*. She spoke and acted and dressed and thought like some hippie living thirty years out of her proper era. The Colonel didn't like the whole idea of having someone like Cindy being part of the family, and he had never concealed his dislike of her from Mike. It was a problem between them.

The phone rang and rang. No answer at his brother's house; no way to leave a message, either. A backup number came up on the little screen: Cindy's jewelry studio. No answer there either.

A second backup number appeared — the gallery in Santa Monica where she had her retail shop. A clerk answered, a boy who by the sound of his high scratchy voice was probably about sixteen. The Colonel asked for Mrs. Carmichael. Hasn't been in yet today, the clerk said. The kid didn't sound very concerned. He made it seem as if he was doing the Colonel a favor by answering the phone at all. Nobody under twenty-five had any respect for telephones. They were all getting biochips implanted, the Colonel had heard. That was the hottest thing now, passing data around with your forearm pressed against an X-plate. Or so his nephew Paul had said. Paul was twenty-seven, or so — young enough to know about these things. Telephones, Paul had said, were for dinosaurs.

"I'm Mrs. Carmichael's brother-in-law," the Colonel said. "Ask her to call me when she comes in, will you, please?"

"Is there some problem?"

"I don't know if there is or not. I'm up in Santa Barbara, and I was wondering whether ... the fire, you know ... their house ..."

"Oh. Right. The fire. It's, like, out by Simi Valley somewhere, right?" The kid said it as if that were in some other country. "The Carmichaels live, like, in L.A., you know, just above Sunset. I wouldn't worry about them. But I'll have her phone you if she checks in with me. She have your implant access code?"

"I just use the regular data web." I'm a dinosaur, the Colonel thought. I come from a long line of them. "She knows the number."

As soon as he clipped the cellphone back in his waistband it made the little bleeping sound of an incoming call.

"Yes?" he said, a little too eagerly.

"It's Anse, dad." His older son's deep baritone. The Colonel had three children, Rosalie and the two boys. Anse — Anson Carmichael IV — was the good son, decent family man, sober, steady, predictable. The other one, Ronald, hadn't worked out quite as expected. "Have you heard what's going on?"

"The fire? The critters from Mars? Yes. Rosalie called me about it about half an hour ago. I've been watching the TV. I can see the smoke from out here on the porch."

"Dad, are you going to be all right? The wind's blowing east to west, straight toward you. They say the Santa Susana fire's moving into Ventura County already."

"That's a whole county away from me," the Colonel said. "It would have to get to a lot of other places first. — How are things down your way, Anse?"

"Here? We're getting Santa Anas, sure, but the nearest fire's up back of Anaheim. Not a chance it'll move down toward us. It's you I'm worried about, Dad."

"Don't. Fire comes anywhere within thirty miles of here, I'll get in the car and drive up to Monterey, San Francisco, Oregon, someplace like that. But it won't happen. We know how to cope with fires in this state. I'm more interested in these E-Ts. What the devil do you suppose they are? This isn't all just some kind of movie stunt, is it?"

"I don't think so, dad."

"No. Neither do I, really. Nobody's that dumb, to set half of L.A. on fire for a publicity event. I hear that they're in New York and London and a lot of other places too."

"Washington?" Anse asked.

"Haven't heard anything about Washington," said the Colonel. "Haven't heard anything from Washington, either. Odd that the President hasn't been on the air yet."

"You don't think they've captured him, do you?"

The Colonel laughed. "This is all so crazy, isn't it? Men from Mars marching through our cities. — No, I don't suppose they've captured him. I figure he must be stashed away somewhere very deep, having an extremely lively meeting with the National Security Council. Wouldn't you say so?"

"We don't have any kind of contingency plans for alien invasions, so far as I know. But I'm not up on that sort of stuff these days." Anse had been an officer in the Army's materiel-procurement arm, but he had left the service about two years back, tempted away by a goodly aerospace-industry paycheck. The Colonel hadn't been pleased. After a moment Anse said, sounding a little uncomfortable, as he always

did when he said something he didn't really believe simply because he suspected the Colonel wanted to hear it, "Well, if it's war with Mars, or wherever it is they come from, so be it. I'm ready to go back in, if I'm needed."

"So am I. I'm not too old. If I spoke Martian, I'd volunteer my services as an interpreter. But I don't, and nobody's been calling me for my advice so far, either."

"They should," Anse said.

"Yes," the Colonel said, perhaps a little too vehemently. "They really should."

There was silence at the other end for a moment. They were treading on dangerous territory.

Anse said, finally, "You want to hear one more crazy thing, Dad? I think I caught a glimpse of Cindy on the news this morning, in the crowd at the Porter Ranch mall."

"Cindy?"

"Or her twin, if she has one. Looked just like her, for sure. Five, six hundred people standing outside the entrance of the WalMart watching the E-Ts go walking by, and for a second the camera zoomed down and I was sure I saw Cindy right in the front row. The hair was like hers, dark, cut in bangs. Big earrings, the hoops she always wears. — Well, maybe it was someone else. But I wouldn't put it past her, going up to that mall to look at the E-Ts."

"It would have been cordoned off right away, the moment the critters arrived. Not likely that the police would have been letting rubberneckers in. You must have been mistaken."

"Maybe so. — Mike's out of town, right?"

"Yes," said the Colonel. "Supposed to be back today. Called his house, got no answer. If he's back already, I suspect he's gone out on volunteer fire duty the way he always does."

Anse laughed. "Old Mike would have a fit if it turned out that that really was Cindy out there at the mall with the E-Ts."

"I suppose he would. But that wasn't Cindy out there. — Listen, Anse, I do appreciate your calling. Stay in touch, okay?"

She had never seen anything so beautiful. She had never even imagined that such beauty could exist.

The place was palatial. Every chamber was at least twenty feet high. The shining walls tapered upward in eerie zigzag angles, meeting far overhead in a kind of Gothic vault, but not rigid-looking the way Gothic was. Instead there was a sudden twist and leap up there, a quick baffling shift of direction, as though the ceilings were partly in one dimension and partly in another.

And the ship was one huge hall of mirrors. Every surface, *every single one*, had a reflective metallic sheen. Wherever your eye came to rest you saw a million ricocheting shimmering images, receding dizzily to infinity. There didn't seem to be any actual sources of illumination in here, just a luminous glow that came out of nowhere, as though being generated by the back-and-forth interaction of all those mirror-bright metal surfaces.

And the plants ... the flowers ...

Cindy loved plants, the stranger the better. The garden of their little Laurel Canyon house was dense with them, chosen for their tropical strangeness, their corkscrew stems and spiky leaves and unusual variegations.

But her garden looked like a dull prosaic bunch of petunias and marigolds compared with the fantasy-land plants that grew everywhere about the ship, drifting freely in mid-air, seemingly having no need of soil or water.

Forking things with fleshy turquoise leaves big enough to serve as mattresses for elephants; plants that looked like clusters of spears, and one that had a lightning-bolt shape, and some that grew upside-down, standing on fanned-out sprays of delicate purple foliage. And the flowers! Green blossoms with bright inquisitive magenta eyes at their centers; furry black flowers, tipped with splashes of gold, that

throbbed like moth-wings; flowers that seemed to be made out of silver wire; flowers that looked like tufts of flame; flowers that emitted low musical tones.

Cindy loved them all. She yearned to know their names. Her mind went soaring into ecstasy at the thought of what a botanical garden on Planet Hesteghon must look like.

Eight hostages were in here with her, the youngest a girl of about eleven, the oldest a man who looked to be in his eighties. They all seemed terrified. They were sitting together in a sorry little heap, sobbing, shivering, praying, muttering. Only Cindy was up and around, wandering through the immense room like Alice let loose in Wonderland.

It weirded her out to see how miserable the others all were in the presence of such fantastic beauty.

"No," Cindy told them, coming over and standing in front of them. "Stop crying! This is going to be the most wonderful moment of your lives. They don't intend to harm us."

A couple of them glared at her. The ones who were sobbing sobbed harder.

"I mean it," she said. "I know. These people are from the planet Hesteghon, which you could have read about in the Testimony of Hermes. The Hesteghon people come to Earth every five thousand years. They were the original Sumerian gods, you know. Taught the Sumerians how to write on clay tablets. On an earlier visit they taught the Cro-Magnons to paint on cave walls."

"She's a lunatic," one of the women said. "Will somebody please shut her up?"

"Hear me out," Cindy said. "I promise you, we're absolutely safe in their hands. On this visit their job is to teach us at long last how to live in peace, forever and ever. We'll be their communicants. They'll speak through us, and we'll carry their message to all the world." She smiled. "You think I'm a nut case, I know, but I'm actually the sanest one here. And I tell you—"

Someone screamed. Someone pointed, stabbing her finger wildly into the air. They all began to cower and cringe.

One of the aliens had entered the huge room. It stood about ten yards to her rear, swaying gently on the little tips of its walking-tentacles. There was an aura of great tranquility about it. Cindy felt a wonderful stream of love and peace emanating from it. Its two enormous golden eyes were benign wells of serene radiance.

They are like gods, she thought. Gods.

"My name is Cindy Carmichael," she told the alien straight away. "I want to welcome you to Earth. I want you to know how glad I am that you've come to fulfill your ancient promise."

The giant creature continued to rock pleasantly back and forth. It did not appear to notice that she had spoken.

"Talk to me with your mind," Cindy said. "I'm not afraid of you. They are, but I'm not. Tell me about Hesteghon. I want to know everything there is to know about it."

One of the airborne flowers, velvety black with pale green spots on its two fleshy petals, drifted nearer to her. There was a crevice at its center that looked remarkably like a vagina. From that long dark slit emerged a little tendril that quivered once and gave off a low-pitched blurt of sound. Abruptly Cindy found herself unable to speak. She had lost the power of shaping words entirely. But there was nothing upsetting about that; she understood that the alien simply did not want her to speak just now. When it was ready to restore her ability to speak it would certainly do so.

A second quick sound came from the slit at the heart of the black flower, a higher-pitched one than before. And Cindy felt the alien entering her mind.

It was almost a sexual thing. It went inside her smoothly and easily and completely, and it filled her just as thoroughly as a hand fills a glove. She was still there inside herself, but there was something else in there too, something immense and omnipotent, causing her no injury, displacing nothing, but making itself at home in her as though there had always been a space within her large enough for the mind of a gigantic alien being to occupy.

She felt it massaging her brain.

That was the only word for it: *massaging*. A gentle soothing kneading sensation, as of fingertips lovingly caressing the folds and convolutions of her brain. What the alien was doing, she realized, was methodically going through her entire accumulation of knowledge and memory, examining every single experience of her life from the moment of birth until this second, absorbing it all. In a few seconds it was done with the job, and now, she knew, it would be able to write her complete biography, if it wanted to. It knew whatever she knew, the street she had lived on when she was a little girl and the name of her first lover and the exact design of the star sapphire ring she had finished making last Tuesday, and all the rest of the things in her mind, including a good many things, very probably, that she had long ago forgotten herself.

Then it withdrew from her and she could speak again and she said as soon as she could, "You know now, don't you, that I'm not frightened of you. That I love you and want to do everything I can to help you fulfill your mission."

And, since she suspected it preferred to communicate telepathically instead of by voice, she said to it also, silently, with all the mental force that she could muster:

Tell me everything about Hesteghon.

But the alien did not seem to be ready to tell her anything. It contemplated her gravely and, Cindy thought, tenderly, but she felt no sense of contact with its mind. And then it went away.

The Colonel's phone bleeped again. A hearty booming unfamiliar voice said, "Anson? Anson Carmichael? Lloyd Buckley here!"

"I'm sorry," the Colonel said, a little too quickly. "I'm afraid I don't know —"

Then he placed the name, and his heart began to pound, and a prickle of excitement began running up and down his back.

"Calling from Washington."

Buckley. The Colonel remembered him. Big red-faced man, loud, cheery, smart. Career State Department man; during the latter years of the Clinton administration an assistant secretary of state for third-world cultural liaison who had done diplomatic shuttle service in Somalia, Bosnia, Afghanistan, Turkey, the Seychelles, and other post-Cold-War hot-spots. A student of military history, he liked to call himself, brandishing the names of Clausewitz, Churchill, Fuller, Creasy. Fancied himself something of an anthropologist, too. Had audited one semester of the course that the Colonel had taught at the Academy, the one in the psychology of non-western cultures.

"You've been keeping up with the situation, naturally," Buckley said. "You're not having any problem with those fires, are you?"

"Not here. They're a couple of counties away."

"Good. Good. Splendid. — Seen the Entities on the tube yet? The shopping-mall thing, and all?"

"The Entities, is that what we're calling them, then?"

"The Entities, yes. The aliens. The extraterrestrials. The invaders. 'Entities' seems like the best handle, at least for now. Nice neutral term. 'E-T' is too Hollywood and 'Aliens' makes it sound like a problem for the Immigration & Naturalization Service."

"And we don't know that they're invaders yet, do we?" the Colonel said. "Do we? Lloyd, tell me what the hell this is all about."

Buckley chuckled. "As a matter of fact, Anson, we were hoping you might be able to tell us. Do you think you could get your aging bones off to Washington first thing tomorrow? The White House has called a meeting of high honchos and overlords to discuss our response to the ... ah ... event, and we're bringing in a little cadre of special consultants. If we have an Air Force helicopter on your front lawn at half past five tomorrow morning to pick you up, do you think you could manage to clamber aboard?"

The meeting was at the Pentagon, not the White House. That seemed unusual. But why should anything be usual today, with alien beings wandering the face of the Earth?

The main action, the Colonel knew by now, was in cities. Rio de Janeiro. Johannesburg. Moscow. Istanbul. Frankfurt. London. Oslo. Istanbul. Bombay. Melbourne. Et cetera, et cetera. Aliens all over the place, in fact, except for a few strikingly obvious places where they had somehow not bothered to land, like Washington D.C., and Tokyo, and Beijing.

The ships they arrived in were of various kinds, driven by varying means of propulsion that ranged from noisy thrust-driven chemical rockets up to the mysterious and unfathomably silent. Some came in on mighty trails of fire, like the one that had landed near Los Angeles. Some just popped into view out of nowhere, as the one in New York had done. Some landed in the middle of big cities, like the one in Istanbul that set itself down on the plaza between Hagia Sophia and the Blue Mosque and the one in Rome that parked itself in front of St. Peter's, but others chose suburban landing sites.

They made no announcements, made no demands, decreed no decrees, offered no explanations. They didn't say a thing.

They were simply here.

The

air in the Pentagon's long corridors had the same stale synthetic smell that he remembered from the old days, the lighting fixtures were no more beautiful than they had been and still cast that sickly light, the walls were as drab. But the checkpoint guards seemed much too young, and some of the security procedures were different, now, too.

These days they screened people to see if they had biochip implants in their arms. "Sorry," the Colonel said, grinning. "I'm not that modern." But they screened him anyway, and very thoroughly. And moved him on through, though the other three who had flown with him from California, the ruddy-bearded UCLA professor and the Cal Tech astronomer with the British accent, and that lovely but somewhat dazed young dark-haired woman who had actually been held for a short time as a hostage aboard the alien spaceship, were kept back for more elaborate interrogation, as civilians usually were.

As he approached the meeting room itself, the Colonel began to ratchet himself up a couple of gears, getting himself up to speed for whatever lay ahead.

Once upon a time, some thirty years ago, he had been part of the strategic planning team in Saigon, helping to run a war that could not possibly have been won, coping on a day-by-day basis with the task of tracking down the worms that kept wriggling up through the quicksand and trying to put them in their proper cans, while simultaneously searching for the light at the end of the tunnel. He had distinguished himself pretty considerably in that capacity, which was why he had started his Vietnam tour as a second lieutenant and finished it as a major, with further promotions ahead.

But he had given all that high-powered stuff up, long ago, first for a post-Vietnam doctorate in Asian Studies and a teaching appointment at the Academy, and then, after his wife's death, for the quiet life of a walnut farmer in the hills above Santa Barbara. He was, here and now in the charming first decade of the charming twenty-first century, too far out of things to know or care much about the contemporary world, having participated neither in the glorious Net that everybody was plugged into, nor the even newer and glitzier world of biochip implants, nor, in fact, anything else of importance that had happened since about 1995.

Today, though, he needed to reactivate his thinking cap and call upon the smarts that had been at his command in the good old days

of the battle for the hearts and minds of those pleasant but complicated people in the ricepaddies of the Mekong Delta.

The meeting, which was being held in a big, bleak, surprisingly unpretentious conference room on the third floor, had been going on for some hours by the time the Colonel was ushered in. Neckties had been loosened all over the room, coats had come off, the male faces were beginning to look stubbly, pyramids of empty white plastic coffee containers were stacked up everywhere. Lloyd Buckley, who came rumbling forward to seize the Colonel's hand the moment the Colonel entered, had the eroded look of a man who had had no sleep.

To the room in general Buckley cried, "Gentlemen, ladies, may I introduce Colonel Anson Carmichael III, U.S. Army, Retired. A brilliant man whose special insights are going to be invaluable to us."

The Colonel recognized the Vice President, naturally, and the Speaker of the House. The President did not seem to be in the room, nor the Secretary of State. There was an assortment of Navy people and Air Force people and Army people and Marines people, plenty of braid. The Colonel knew most of them at least by sight. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Joseph F. Steele, gave the Colonel a warm smile. They had served together in Saigon in '67 under General Matheson, when the future Colonel had been a brand new second lieutenant assigned to the Field Advisory Unit of the U.S. Military Assistance Command, dear old gummed-up MAC-V, as an interpreter, and Joe Steele, four years younger, a kid just out of West Point, had started out with some very humble position for MAC-V's Intelligence guys, though he had risen very quickly. And had kept on rising ever since.

Buckley went around the room, making introductions. "The Secretary of Defense, Mr. Gallagher —" Slight, almost inconsequential-looking man, lantern jaw, close-cropped gray hair forming a kind of skullcap on his narrow head, formidable glint of Jesuitical intelligence and dedication in his chilly dark-brown eyes. "The Secretary of Communications, Ms. Crawford —" Elegant woman, coppery glints in her dark hair, a Native American sharpness to her cheekbones and lips. "The Senate Majority Leader, Mr. Bacon of your very own state —" Rangy, athletic-looking fellow, probably a terrific tennis player. "Dr. Kaufman of Harvard's Physics department —" Plump, sleepy-looking, badly dressed. "The Presidential Science Advisor, Dr. Elias —" Impressive woman, stocky, self-contained. The heads of the House Armed Services Committee and the Senate Armed Services Committee. The Chief of Naval Operations. The Marine Commandant. The top brass of the Army and Air Force. The Secretaries of the Army and Navy.

"And your own title these days, Lloyd?" the Colonel asked quietly, when Buckley seemed to have finished.

Buckley seemed nonplussed. It was the Vice President who said, while Buckley merely gaped, "Mr. Buckley is the National Security Advisor, Colonel Carmichael."

Ah, so. Long way up from being an assistant secretary of state for cultural affairs. The Colonel murmured something apologetic about not keeping up with the news as assiduously as he once did, now that he was retired to his walnut groves and almond trees.

The rest of the passengers from the Colonel's cross-country flight now filed in: Joshua Leonards, the rotund UCLA anthropologist, who with his untrimmed red beard and ratty argyle sweater looked like some 19th-century Russian anarchist, and Peter Carlyle-Macavoy, the British astronomer from the Cal Tech extraterrestrial-intelligence search program, elongated of body and fiercely bright of eye, and the shopping-mall abductee, Margaret Something-or-Other, a petite, attractive woman of thirty or so.

"Good," Buckley said. "We're all here, now. Let's bring our newcomers up to date on the situation as it now stands." He clapped a data wand to his wrist — that was interesting, the Colonel thought, a man of Buckley's age has had a biochip implant — and uttered a quick command into it. A screen blossomed into vivid colors on the wall behind him.

"These," said Buckley, "are the sites of known Entity landings. As you see, their ships have touched down on every continent except Antarctica and in most of the capital cities of the world. We believe

that at least thirty-four large-scale ships, containing hundreds or even thousands of aliens, have arrived. Aliens of various kinds are coming forth from the big ships in smaller vehicles. We have identified five different types of Entity vehicles and three distinct species of alien life, as so —"

He touched the wand to the implanted biochip node in his forearm and said the magic word, and strange life-forms appeared on the screen. The Colonel recognized the upright squid-like things that he had seen on television, stalking around that shopping mall in Porter Ranch, and Margaret Something-or-Other recognized them too, uttering a gasp of shock or distaste. But then the squids went away and some creatures that looked like faceless, limbless ghosts appeared, and, after those, some truly monstrous things as big as houses that were galumphing around in a park on clusters of immense legs, knocking over tall trees as they went.

"Up till now," Buckley went on, "the Entities have made no attempt at communicating with us, insofar as we are aware. We have sent messages to them in a variety of languages and artificial information-organizing systems, but we have no way of telling whether they've received them, or, if they have, whether they're capable of understanding them."

"What means have you used for sending these messages?" asked Carlyle-Macavoy, the Cal Tech man, crisply.

"Radio, of course. Short wave, AM, FM, right on up the communications spectrum. Plus semaphore signals, laser flashes and such, Morse code: you name it."

Carlyle-Macavoy said, "How about coded emissions at 1420 Megahertz? The universal hydrogen emission frequency, I mean."

"First thing tried," said Kaufman of Harvard. "Nada. Zilch."

"So," Buckley said, "the aliens are here, we somehow didn't see them coming in any way, and they're prowling around unhindered in thirty or forty cities. We don't know what they want, we don't know what they plan to do. Of course, if they have any kind of hostile intent, we intend to be on guard. I should tell you, though, that we have discussed already today, and already ruled out, the thought of an immediate pre-emptive attack against them."

Joshua Leonards, the burly, shaggy UCLA anthropology professor, went ballistic at that.

"You mean," he said, "that at one point you were seriously considering tossing nuclear bombs at them?"

Buckley's florid cheeks turned very red. "We've explored all sorts of options today, Dr. Leonards. Including some that obviously needed to be rejected instantly."

"A nuclear attack was never for a moment under consideration," said General Steele of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, in the tone of voice he might have used to a bright but obstreperous eleven-year-old boy. "Never. But going nuclear isn't our only option. For the time being, though, we have decided that any sort of offensive move would be —"

"The time being?" Leonards cried. He waved his arms around wildly and flung his head back, unkempt russet beard jabbing upward. He looked like some primordial Marxist getting ready to toss a grenade at the Czar. "Mr. Buckley, is it too soon after my arrival at this meeting for me to be butting in? Because I think I need to do some butting in right away."

"Go ahead, Dr. Leonards."

"You say you've already ruled out a pre-emptive strike. Which I assume that you mean that we, the United States of America, aren't planning any such thing. And I assume that nobody on Earth is crazy enough to want to nuke ships that happen to be occupying sites right in the middle of big cities. But, as you say, that doesn't rule out other kinds of military action. I don't see anyone in this room representing Russia or England or France, to name just three of the countries where spaceships have landed. Are we making any attempt to coordinate our response with such countries as those?"

Buckley looked toward the Vice President.

She said, "We are, Dr. Leonards, and we will be continuing to do so

on a round-the clock basis. Let me assure you of that."

"Good. Because Mr. Buckley has said that every imaginable means has been used in trying to communicate with the aliens, but he also said that we had been at least considering making them targets for our weaponry. May I point out that suddenly firing a cannon at somebody is a form of communication too? Which I think would indeed result in the opening of a dialog with the aliens, but it probably wouldn't be a conversation we'd enjoy having."

"You're suggesting that if we attacked, we'd be met with unanswerable force?" asked Secretary of Defense Gallagher. "That we're fundamentally helpless before them?"

Leonards said, "We don't know that. Very possibly we are. But it's not a hypothesis that we really need to test right this minute by doing something stupid."

At least seven people spoke at once. But Peter Carlyle-Macavoy said, in the kind of quiet, chipped-around-the-edges voice that cuts through any sort of hubbub, "I think we can safely assume that we'd be completely out of our depth in any kind of military encounter with them. Attacking those ships would be the most suicidal thing we could possibly do."

The Colonel nodded.

But the Joint Chiefs and more than a few others in the room began once again to stir in their seats and show other signs of agitation before the astronomer was halfway through his statement.

The Secretary of the Army was the first to voice his objections. "You're taking the same pessimistic position as Dr. Leonards, aren't you? You're essentially telling us that we're beaten already, without our firing a shot, right?"

"Essentially, yes, that's the situation," replied Carlyle — Macavoy. "If we try to fight, we'll be met with a display of insuperable power." Which set off a second and louder uproar that was interrupted only by the impressive clapping of Buckley's hands.

"Please, gentlemen. Please!"

The room actually grew quiet.

Buckley said, "Colonel Carmichael, as our expert on interactions with alien cultures, what do you think of the situation?"

"That we are absolutely in the dark and we had damned well not do anything until we know what's what. We don't even know whether we've been invaded. This may simply be a friendly visit. It may be a bunch of harmless tourists making a summer cruise of the galaxy. On the other hand, if it is an invasion, it's being undertaken by a vastly superior civilization and there's every chance that we are just as helpless before it as Dr. Carlyle-Macavoy says we are."

Defense, Navy, Army, and three or four others were standing by that time, waving their arms for attention. The Colonel wasn't through speaking, though.

"We know nothing about these beings," he said, with great firmness. "Nothing. We don't even know how to go about *learning* anything about them. Do they understand any of our languages? Who knows? We sure don't understand any of theirs. Among the many things we don't know about this collection of Entities," he went on, "is, for example, which of them is the dominant species. We suspect that the big squid-like ones are, but how can we be sure? For all we know, the various kinds we've seen up till now are just drones, and the real masters are still up in space aboard a mother ship that they've made invisible and undetectable to us, waiting for the lesser breeds to get done with the initial phases of the conquest."

That was quite a wild idea to have come from the lips of an elderly, retired, walnut-farming colonel. Lloyd Buckley looked startled. So did the scientists, Carlyle-Macavoy and Kaufman and Elias. The Colonel was pretty startled by it himself.

"I have another thought," the Colonel went on, "about their failure so far to attempt any kind of communication with us, and how it reflects on their sense of their relative superiority to us. Speaking now as a professor of non-western psychology, rather than as a former military man, I want to put forth the point that their refusal to speak with us might not be a function of their ignorance so much as

a way of making that overwhelming superiority obvious. I mean, how could they not have learned our languages, if they had wanted to? Races that can travel between the stars shouldn't have any difficulty decoding simple stuff like Indo-European-based languages. But if they're looking for a way to show us that we are altogether insignificant to them, well, not bothering to say hello to us in our own language is a pretty good way of doing it. I could cite plenty of precedent for that kind of attitude right out of Japanese or Chinese history."

Buckley said to Carlyle-Macavoy, "Can we have some of your thoughts about all this, if you will?"

"What the Colonel has proposed is an interesting notion, though of course I have no way of telling whether there's any substance to it. But let me point out this: these aliens appeared in our skies without having given us a whisper of radio noise and not a smidgen of visual evidence that they were approaching us. Let's not even mention the various Starguard groups that keep watch for unexpected incoming asteroids. Let's just consider the radio evidence. Do you know about the SETI project that's been going on under that and several other names for the last forty or fifty years? Scanning the heavens for radio signals from intelligent beings elsewhere in the galaxy? I happen to be affiliated with one branch of that project. Don't you think we had instruments looking all up and down the electromagnetic spectrum for signs of alien life at the very moment the aliens arrived? And we didn't detect a thing until they began showing up on airport radar screens."

"So you think there can be a hidden mother ship sitting out there in orbit," Steele said.

"It's perfectly possible. But the main point, as I know Colonel Carmichael will agree, is that the only thing we can say about these aliens for certain at this moment is that they're representatives of a race vastly more advanced than ourselves, and we had bloody well better be cautious about how we react to their arrival here."

"You keep telling us that," the Army Secretary grumbled, "but you don't support it with any —"

"Look," said Peter Carlyle-Macavoy, "either they materialized right bang out of hyperspace somewhere inside the orbit of the moon, a concept which I think will make Dr. Kaufman and some of the rest of you extremely uncomfortable on the level of theoretical physics, or else they used some method of shielding themselves from all of our detecting devices as they came sneaking up on us. Either case shows we are dealing with beings with an exceedingly superior technology. It's reasonable to believe that they'd easily be able to cope with any firepower we might throw at them. Our most frightful nuclear weapons would be so much bows-and-arrows stuff to them. And they might, if sufficiently annoyed, retaliate even to a non-nuclear attack in a way intended to teach us to be less bothersome."

"Agreed," said Joshua Leonards. "Completely."

"They may be superior," said a voice from the back, "but we've got the superiority of numbers on our side. We're a whole planet full of people and they're just forty shiploads of —"

"Perhaps we outnumber them, yes," Colonel Carmichael said, "but may I remind you that the Aztecs considerably outnumbered the Spaniards, and people speak Spanish in Mexico today?"

"So is it an invasion, then, Colonel?" General Steele asked.

"I told you: I can't say. Certainly it has the look of one. But the only real fact we have about these ... ah ... Entities ... is that they're here. We can't make any assumptions about them. If we learned anything at all from our unhappy entanglement in Vietnam, it's that there are plenty of people on this planet whose minds don't operate the way ours do, who work off an entirely different set of basic assumptions from ours; and even so they are all human beings with the same inner mental wiring that we have. The Entities aren't even remotely human, and their way of thinking is entirely beyond my expertise right now. Until we know how to communicate with them — or, to put it another way, until they have deigned to communicate with us — we need to simply sit tight and —"

"Maybe they have communicated with us, if what I was told aboard the ship was true," said the woman who had been taken hostage at

the shopping mall, suddenly, in a tiny and dreamy but perfectly audible voice. "With one of us, at least. And they told her lots of things about themselves. So it's already happened. If you can believe what she said, that is."

More hubbub. Sounds of surprise, even shock, and a few low exasperated expostulations.

Buckley asked the dark-haired woman to stand and introduce herself. The Colonel yielded the floor to her with a little formal bow. She got a bit unsteadily to her feet and said, speaking in a breathy monotone, "My name is Margaret Gabrielson and I live on Wilbur Avenue in Northridge, California, and yesterday morning I was on my way to visit my sister who lives in Thousand Oaks when I stopped for gas at a Chevron station in a mall in Porter Ranch. And I was captured by an alien and taken aboard their spaceship, which is the truth and nothing but truth, so help me God."

"This isn't a courtroom, Ms. Gabrielson," said Buckley gently. "You aren't testifying now. Just tell us what happened to you on board the alien ship."

"Yes," she said. "What happened to me on board the alien ship."

And then she was silent for about ten thousand years.

Was she abashed at finding herself inside the actual and literal Pentagon, in front of a largely though not entirely male group of highly important governmental personages and asked to describe the wholly improbable, even absurd, events that had befallen her? Was she still befuddled and bewildered by her strange experiences among the Entities, or by the sedatives that had been given to her afterward? Or was she simply your basic inarticulate early-twenty-first-century American, who had not in any way been equipped during the thirty years of her life with the technical skill required in order to express herself in public in linear and connected sentences?

Some of each, no doubt, the Colonel thought.

Everyone was very patient with her. What choice was there?

And after that interminable-seeming silence she said, "It was like, mirrors, everywhere. The ship. All metal and everything shining and it was gigantic inside, like some sort of stadium with walls around it."

It was a start, anyway. The Colonel, sitting just beside her, gave her a warm encouraging smile.

"There were, you know, around twenty of us, maybe twenty-five," she continued, after another immense terrified pause. "They put us, like, in two groups in different rooms. One of the men with me was hurt when they caught him, like, I think, a broken leg, and the others were trying to make him, you know, comfortable. It was this giant-sized room, like maybe as big as a movie theater, weird enormous flowers floating through the air everywhere, and we were all in one corner of it. We figured they were, like, going to cut us up, you know, to see what was inside us. Somebody said that, and after that we couldn't stop thinking about it."

She dabbed away tears. There was another interminable silence.

"The aliens," Buckley prompted softly. "Tell us about them."

Big, the woman said. Huge. Terrifying. They came by every hour or two, gazing at them for a little while and then going away again. It was, she said, like seeing your worst nightmares come to life. She had felt sick to her stomach every time she saw one of them. She had wanted to curl up and cry. She looked as though she wanted to curl up and cry right this minute, here and now.

"You said," Buckley reminded her, "that one woman in your group experienced some sort of communication with them?"

"Yes. There was this woman, who was, like, a little strange, I have to say — she was from Los Angeles, I guess about forty years old, with shiny black hair, and she had a lot of fantastic jewelry on, earrings like big hoops and three or four strings of beads and, like, a whole bunch of rings, and she was wearing this big wide bright-colored skirt like my grandmother used to wear in the Sixties, and sandals, and stuff. Cindy, her name was."

The Colonel gasped.

So it was indeed Cindy that Anse had seen on the television news yesterday morning in the crowd at that shopping mall; and later the

aliens had grabbed her, and she had been taken aboard that ship. Did Mike know? Where was Mike, anyway?

Margaret Gabrielson was speaking again.

This woman Cindy, she said, was the only one in the group who had no fear of the aliens. When one of the aliens came into the chamber, she walked right up to it and greeted it like it was an old friend, and told it that it and all its people were welcome on Earth, that she was glad that they were here.

"What did the aliens say?" Buckley asked.

Nothing, apparently. The alien just stood there high above her, looking down at her the way you might look at a dog or a cat. But after the alien left the room, Cindy said that the alien had spoken to her, like in a mental way, telepathy.

"And said what to her?" asked Buckley.

Silence. Hesitation.

But then it came out, all in a rush:

"— that the aliens wanted us to know that they weren't going to harm the world in any way, that they were, like, here on a diplomatic mission, that they were part of some huge United Nations of planets and they had come to ask us to join. They were just going to stay for a few weeks and then most of them were going back to their own world, though some of them were going to stay as ambassadors, you know, to teach us a new and better way of life."

"Uh-oh," Joshua Leonards muttered. "Scary stuff. The missionaries always have some new and better way of life that they want to teach. And you know what happens next."

"They also said," Margaret Gabrielson continued, "that they would take a few Earth people back to their world to show them what sort of place it was. Volunteers, only. And, like, this woman Cindy had volunteered. When they took us off the ship a few hours later, she was the only one who stayed behind."

"And she seemed happy about that?" Buckley asked.

"She was, like, ecstatic."

The Colonel winced. That sounded like Cindy, all right. Oh, Mike! How he loved her, Mike did. But in the twinkling of an eye she had abandoned him for monsters from some far star.

Buckley said, "You heard all of this, you say, only from this woman Cindy? None of the others of you had any kind of, ah, mental contact with the aliens?"

"None. It was only Cindy who had it, or said she did. All that stuff about ambassadors, coming in peace, that was all hers. But it couldn't have been true. She was really crazy, that woman. She was like, 'The coming of the aliens was prophesied in this book that I read years and years ago, and everything is following the prophecy exactly.' That's what she said, and you knew it was impossible. She was crazy, that woman. *Crazy*."

Yes, the Colonel thought. *Crazy*. And Margaret Gabrielson, at that moment reaching her snapping point at last, burst into hysterical tears and began to collapse into herself and sink toward the floor. The Colonel rose and caught her deftly as she fell, and steadied her and held her against his chest, murmuring soothing things to her while she wept.

"It was awful, awful, awful," Margaret Gabrielson was saying, voice muffled, head pressed against the Colonel's ribs. "Those E-T monsters wandering around ... and us not knowing what they were going to do to us ... that crazy woman and all her loony-tunes nonsense ... crazy, she was, crazy ..."

"Well," Lloyd Buckley said. "So much for the first report of communications with the aliens."

A chime of some sort went off, just then. An aide jumped up, pressed his wrist-implant to a data node in the wall, gave a one-syllable command. Something lit up on a wall-mounted ribbon screen next to the node and a yellow printout came gliding from a slot below it. The aide brought it to Buckley, who glanced at it and coughed and tugged at his lower lip and made a sour face. And eventually said, "Colonel Carmichael — Anson — do you happen to have a brother named Myron?"

"Everyone calls him Mike," the Colonel said. "But yes, yes, he's my

younger brother."

"Message just in from California about him that I'm supposed to pass along to you. It's bad news, I'm afraid, Anson."

All things considered, it hadn't been much of a meeting, the Colonel thought, leaden-hearted over his brother's heroic but shocking and altogether unacceptable death fighting the L.A. fire. It was sixteen hours later and he was heading home aboard the same Air Force jet that had taken him to Washington the day before. Thinking about Mike in his last moments in some rickety little plane, struggling frenetically and ultimately unsuccessfully against the air currents above the roiling horror of the Ventura County fire.

And this stupid meeting, now! A ghastly waste of time. And a stunning revelation of the hollowness and futility of humanity's self-aggrandizing pretensions.

Buckley had offered to let him go back to his hotel after the news about Mike — but what good would that have done? He was needed. He stayed. And sat in mounting despair during all the pointless rest of it. Those important cabinet officers and generals and admirals, the whole grand crowd of lofty honchos arrayed in solemn conclave, interminably masticating the situation, and to what end? Ultimately the meeting had broken up without any significant information having been brought forth, no conclusions reached, no policy decisions taken. Aside from Wait and See, that is.

Wait, yes. And See.

The secure wall of the sky had been breached without warning; mysterious aliens had landed simultaneously all over Earth; yea, out of nowhere bizarre visitors had come, and they had seen, and after two and a half days they were already acting as if they had conquered. And none of our best and brightest seemed to have the slightest idea of how we should respond.

What was there to say, though?

We must fight and fight and fight until the last of these vile enemy invaders is eradicated from the sacred soil of Earth.

Yes. Yes. Of course. We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, et cetera, et cetera. No flagging, no failing: fight with growing confidence, go on to the end. *We shall never surrender.*

But was this actually an invasion?

And if indeed it was, how did we go about fighting back, and what would happen to us if we tried?

Three seats ahead of him, Leonards and Carlyle-Macavoy were having the same discussion with each other that the Colonel was having with himself. And, so it appeared, coming to the same melancholy conclusions.

"Oh, Colonel, I feel so sad for you," Margaret Gabrielson said, materializing like a wraith in front of him in the aisle. They were all flying back to California together, he and she and squat grubby Leonards and the long-legged Brit. "Do you mind if I sit here?"

With an indifferent gesture he beckoned her to the vacant seat.

She settled in beside him, pivoting around to give him a warm, earnest, smile. "You and your brother were very close, weren't you, Colonel?" she said, pulling him abruptly back

from one slough of despond to the other.

"I was the oldest of three boys. Now I'm the only one left."

"Were they in the Army too?"

"The youngest was Air Force. A test pilot, he was. Flew one experimental plane too many, ten years back. And the other one, Mike, the one that just ... died, he decided to go in for the Navy, because no one in our family had ever been Navy, and Mike always had to do what nobody else in the family would even dream of doing. Like marrying that weird woman Cindy and moving to L.A. with her."

"Cindy?"

"The one who was a hostage while you were, the one who volun-

teered to stay with the aliens. That was my brother Mike's wife."

Margaret put her hand over her mouth. "Oh, and I said such horrible things about her! I'm sorry! I'm so sorry!"

The Colonel smiled. She seemed to have shed, he noticed, all of those annoying little childish verbal tics, the "likes" and "you knows" with which she had spattered every sentence at the meeting. As though perhaps in her trembling nervousness in front of all those formidable high officials she had reverted to blathery little-girl locutions, but now, in one-to-one human communication, she was once again capable of speaking adult English.

"I never could stand her, myself," he said. "Simply not my kind of person. Too — *bohemian* for me, do you know what I mean? Too wild. I'm your standard-model straight-arrow guy, conservative, old-fashioned, boring." Not entirely true, he hoped, but true enough. "They train us to be that way in the Service. And it's a good bet that I was born that way, besides. Mike was a bit of a mutant, I suppose. We were a military family, and I guess we were raised to be military types, whatever that means. But Mike had a touch of something else in him, and we always knew it." He closed his eyes a moment, letting memories of Mike's strangeness flood upward in him — Mike's untidiness, his sudden rages, his willingness to let his life be dictated by bizarre whims. And, especially, his fiery obsessive love for Cindy of the beads and sandals.

"Went his own way, did he?"

"Always. I never understood him, not for a moment," the Colonel said. "But he wasn't, I think, all that different from the rest of us deep down underneath. When it was Vietnam time and the kids were growing their hair long and smoking dope and wearing funny-colored clothing, you'd have thought Mike would have been a hippie out there with them, but he became a Navy pilot instead and saw plenty of action. Hated the war, but did his duty as a man and a soldier and a Carmichael."

"Were you in that war too?" Margaret asked.

"Yes. I sure was. And came to hate it too, for that matter. But I was there."

She looked at him wide-eyed, as if he had admitted being at Gettysburg.

"Actually killed people? Got shot at?"

He smiled and shook his head. "I was part of a strategic planning group, behind the lines. But not so far back that I didn't get to be familiar with the sound of machine-gun fire." The Colonel let his eyes droop shut once again for a moment or two. "Damn, that was an ugly war! There aren't any pretty ones, but that one was ugly. Still, you do what they ask you to do, and you don't complain and you don't ask questions, because that's what's needed if there's going to be civilized life — somebody to do the uncivilized things, which nevertheless are necessary to be done."

He was silent for a time.

Then he said, "I got my fill of doing uncivilized things in Vietnam, I guess. A few years after the war I took a leave of absence, went back east, got me a degree in Asian Studies at Johns Hopkins, eventually wound up as a professor at West Point. In ten years I saw Mike maybe three times at most. I could tell that something was missing from his life. Then when my wife got sick I came back to California — family land, her family — and there was Mike, in L.A., of all places, and married to this peculiar modern-day hippie woman Cindy. He wanted me to like her. I tried, Margaret! But we were people from two different worlds. The one single thing we had in common was that we both loved Mike Carmichael."

"Peggy," she said.

"What?"

"My name. Peggy. Nobody really calls me Margaret."

"Ah-hah. I see. Right. *Peggy*."

"Did she like you?"

"Cindy? I have no idea. She was polite enough to me. Her husband's old stuffed shirt of a brother. No doubt thought I was as much of a Martian as she seemed to me. And —"

He stopped speaking abruptly. The lights had gone out.

Not just the overhead lights, but the reading lights, and the auxiliary

lights at floor level in the aisle. They were sitting in absolute darkness within a sealed metal tube traveling at hundreds of miles an hour, 35,000 feet above the surface of the Earth.

"Power failure?" Peggy asked, very quietly.

"An extremely odd one, if it is," said the Colonel.

A voice out of the blackness said, from the front of the cabin, "Ah, we have a little problem here, folks."

It was the second officer, and despite the attempted joviality of his words he sounded shaken. Every one of the ship's electrical systems, he said, had conked out simultaneously. All the instruments had failed, *all*, including the navigation devices and the ones responsible for feeding fuel to the engines. The big jet was without power of any sort now. It had effectively been transformed into a giant glider; it was coasting, right now, traveling on its accumulated momentum and nothing more.

They were somewhere over southern Nevada, the second officer said. Seemed to be some sort of little electrical problem down there, too, because the lights of the city of Las Vegas had been visible a moment ago and now they were not. The world outside the ship was as dark as the ship's interior. But there was no way of finding out what was actually going on out there, because the radio had gone dead, as well as all other instrumentation linking them to the ground. Including air traffic control, of course.

And therefore we are dead also, the Colonel thought, a bit surprised at his own calmness; because how much longer could a plane of this size go on coasting without power through the upper reaches of the atmosphere before it went into free fall? And even if the pilot tried to jolly it down for a landing, how was he possibly going to control the plane with every one of its components kaput, no navigational capacity whatever, and where would he land it in the absolute dark that prevailed?

But then the lights came back on, showing the second officer standing just at the cockpit door, pale and trembling and with the glossy lines of tears showing on his cheeks; and the audio voice of the pilot now was heard, a good old solid deep pilot-voice with only the hint of a tremor in it, saying, "Well, people, I don't have the foggiest idea of what just happened, but I'm going to be making an emergency landing at the Naval Weapons Center before it happens again. Fasten seat-belts, everybody, and hang on tight."

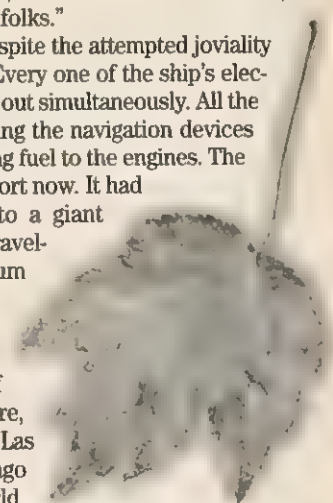
He had the plane safely on the ground six and a half minutes before the lights went off a second time.

This time, they stayed off.

It was the greatest catastrophe in human history. In one moment the world's entire technological capability had been pushed back 350 years. Somehow the Entities had flipped a gigantic switch and turned everything off, everything, at some fundamental level.

Which, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, was a stupendous calamity. When the electricity stopped, all of modern civilization stopped, and there were no backup systems — candles and windmills, could they really be considered backup systems? — to get things going again. This was more than a mere power failure; it was an immense paradigm shift. Nothing at all electrical would work, right down to battery-operated flashlights.

No one could figure out how the Entities had done it, and that was almost as frightening as the thing itself. Had they changed the behavior of electrons? Altered the lattice structure of terrestrial matter so that conductivity was no longer a reality? Or, perhaps, achieved some modification of the dielectric constant itself?



However they had managed it, it had happened. Electromagnetic waves no longer traveled anywhere controllable or useful, and electricity as a going concept was apparently extinct all over Earth.

Goodbye, then — for how long, nobody knew — to telephones and computers and radio and television, to alarm clocks and burglar alarms, to doorbells, garage-door openers, and radar, to oscilloscopes and electron microscopes, to cardiac pacemakers, to electric toothbrushes, to amplifiers of any and every sort, to vacuum tubes and microprocessors. Bicycles were still all right, and rowboats, and graphite pencils. So were hand-guns and rifles. But anything that required electrical energy in order to function was now inoperative. What became known as the Great Silence had fallen.

The electrons simply would not flow. The electrical functions of biological organisms were unaffected, but everything else was kaput. Any sort of circuitry through which a voltage might pass now had become as nonconductive as mud.

Drawbridges and canal locks remained frozen in whatever position they might have been in at the time when the current stopped. Planes unlucky enough to be aloft then, suddenly bereft of all navigational aid and the functioning of their most trivial internal mechanisms, crashed. So did any automobiles that were in transit when the roads went dark, the traffic-control computers went dead, and their own internal guidance systems failed. Cars not in transit at the moment of the death of electricity now were incapable of being started, except for the ancient crank-starting models, and there weren't very many of those still operating. The various computer nets were snuffed in an instant, of course.

The world as we had known it had ended.

What had precipitated the blackout, apparently, was that someone, in a moment of foolish exasperation, had lobbed a couple of bombs at one of the alien ships. No one knew who — the French, the Iraqis, the Russians? — and in the confusions of the moment there was no way of finding out.

The attack did no damage, naturally. The Entity spaceships were, as everyone would swiftly discover, surrounded by force-fields that made it impossible for anyone to approach them without permission or to damage them in attacks from a distance.

What it did succeed in doing was to annoy the Entities. It was annoying in the way that a mosquito's humming can be annoying, and so they retaliated with the alien equivalent of a slap that one might aim at the mosquito's general vicinity on one's arm. Or, as the anthropologist Peter Carlyle-Macavoy had put it at the Pentagon, the attempted destruction of an Entity vessel had been the opening statement in a kind of conversation, to which the Entities had replied in a very much louder voice.

The first power shutdown, the two-minute one, may simply have represented a tune-up of the equipment. The second one that followed a few hours later was the real thing. The Great Silence. The end of the world that had been, and the beginning of a nightmare time of murderous anarchy and terror and utter despair.

After a couple of hellish weeks in the cold and the dark, the power began returning. Sporadically. Selectively. Bewilderingly. Some things like automotive engines and deep-freeze units and water-purification plants began to work again; other things like television sets and tape recorders and radar screens didn't, though electric lights and gas-station pumps did.

The general effect was to bring mankind back from a medieval level of existence to something like that of about 1937, but with strange and seemingly random exceptions. Why telephones, but not modems? Why compact-disc players, but not pocket calculators? And when modems eventually did come back, they didn't always work quite the way they had worked before.

But by then explanations didn't really matter. The basic point had been made, anyway: the world had been conquered, good and proper, just like that, by an unknown enemy for unknown reasons, no explanations given: not a word, in fact, said at all. The invaders had not bothered with a declaration of war, nor had any battles been fought, and there had been no peace negotiations, and no articles of surrender had been signed; but nevertheless the thing had been accom-

plished, in a single night, quite definitively accomplished. Resistance would be punished; and serious resistance would be punished seriously.

Who, in any case, was going to resist? The government? The armed forces? How? Overnight, all governments and armed forces had been rendered obsolescent, if not downright obsolete.

Personal conscience was the only governor left. What had been neighborhoods turned into independent kingdoms, their borders guarded by quick-on-the-trigger vigilantes. Theft, looting, robbery, violent crime of all sorts: these things, never far below the surface in the turn-of-the-century world, now became epidemic.

In the first three weeks after the invasion — the Conquest — hundreds of thousands of people died by the hands of their fellow citizens in the United States alone. It was the war of everyone against everyone, days of frenzy and blood.

This was the time that became known as the Troubles. After the first few wild weeks, things became a little more calm, once electricity began to return, and then calmer still. But they never went back to the pre-Conquest norm.

People attempted to recreate a semblance of their former lives, nevertheless. But the old structures, having fallen apart so completely at the first shove, were maddeningly difficult to rebuild.

A dreamlike new reality had settled in. The texture of life now, for nearly everyone, was like the way life is the morning after some great local catastrophe, an earthquake, a flood, a huge fire, a hurricane. Everything has changed in a flash. You look around for familiar landmarks — a bridge, a row of buildings, the front porch of your house — to see if they're still there. And usually they are; but some degree of solidity seems to have been subtracted from them in the night. Everything is now conditional. Everything is now impermanent. That was how it was now, all over the world.

Civilization, as the term had been understood in the early twenty-first century, had just about fallen apart. Some new form would surely evolve, sooner or later. But when? And what?

In all his years in Vietnam the Colonel had never felt such profound uneasiness, verging on fear, as he did while waiting now for his reunion with Ronnie, his last-born child, from whom he had been estranged so long. This was the family Christmas, the third since the invasion, and Ronnie was coming. He dared not ruin it. He had to hold himself in check no matter what. And he was afraid now that at his first glimpse of Ronnie he would unload all the stored-up anger that was in his heart, and everything would be spoiled.

But then Ronnie came into the room with Anse and the Colonel felt his heart melting in an instant at the sight, here in his own house, of his big, blocky, blond-haired, rosy-cheeked second son.

"Ronnie ... Ronnie, boy ..."

"Hey, Dad, you're looking good! After all this time."

"And you. Put on a little weight, haven't you? But you're not a boy any more, after all."

"Thirty-nine next month. Oh, dad ... dad ... it's been such a goddamn long time ..."

Suddenly they were in each other's arms, a big messy embrace, Ronnie slapping his hands lustily against the Colonel's back and the Colonel heartily squeezing Ronnie's ribs, and then they were apart again and the Colonel was fixing drinks, the stiff double Scotch that he knew Ronnie preferred and sherry for Anse, who never drank anything stronger nowadays; and Ronnie was going around the room hugging people, his sister Rosalie first, then Carole, then his moody cousin Helena and her even-tempered brother Paul, and then a big hello for Rosalie's clunky husband Doug Gannett and their overweight blotchy-faced kid Steve, and a whoop and a holler for Anse's kids, sweeping them up into the air all three together, the twins and Jill —

Oh, he was slick, Ronnie was, thought the Colonel. A real charmer. Always had been.

Ronnie was introducing himself to Peggy Gabrielson, now. Peggy

looked flustered, perhaps because of the way magnetic Ronnie was laying on the beguiling introductory charisma, or maybe because she knew that Ronnie was the family pariah, a shady character with whom the Colonel had had nothing to do for many years, who now for some reason was being taken back into the tribe.

Loudly the Colonel said, when the highballs had been handed out, "You may be wondering why I've called you all here tonight. And in fact I have a full agenda for the next few days: a great quantity of eating and drinking, and also some discussion of Highly Serious Matters." He made sure they heard the capital letters. "The drinking is scheduled to occur —" He paused dramatically and shot his back his cuff to reveal his wristwatch. "—at precisely 1900 hours. Which is in fact, right now. With dinner to follow, and the Highly Serious Discussion tomorrow or the day after." He hoisted his glass. "So: Merry Christmas, all of you! Everyone that I love in the whole poor old battered world, standing right here in front of me. How wonderful that is. How absolutely wonderful. —I'm not getting too mushy in my old age, am I?"

He went around the room to each of them. In a quiet voice the Colonel said to Ronnie, "I'm tremendously glad you came here tonight, son. With the world in the mess it's in, we don't have the luxury of carrying on feuds with our own flesh and blood."

"We'll find a way of getting the Entities off our backs sooner or later, won't we, Dad?"

"Will we? I wonder."

"Is that a hint of defeatism that I hear in your voice?"

"Call it realism, maybe."

"I can't believe I'm hearing Colonel Anson Carmichael III saying any such thing."

"Strictly speaking," said the Colonel, smiling, "I'm a general now. In the California Army of Liberation, which hardly anybody knows about, and which I don't feel like discussing right now."

"I hear that you went face-to-face with the Entities in their own lair. You went right in there, you looked them in the eye, you gave them what-for. Isn't that true, dad?"

"More or less true," he said.

"Rather less than more."

"Tell me about it?"

"Not right now. It wasn't pleasant."

I want tonight, this whole week, to be nothing but pleasant. Oh, Ronnie, you scamp, you miserable rogue ... oh, how happy I am to see you here ..."

I hadn't been pleasant at all, his meeting with the aliens. But it had been necessary, and, after a fashion, instructive.

The ease of the collapse of all human institutions almost immediately upon the arrival of the Entities was a thing that the Colonel had never been able to comprehend, let alone accept. All those governmental bodies, all those laws and constitutions, all those tightly structured military organizations with their elaborate codes of duty and performance: they had turned out to be just so many houses of cards. One quick gust of wind from outer space and they had all blown away. And the little ad-hoc groups that had replaced them were nothing more than local aggregations of thugs on the one hand and hot-headed vigilantes on the other. That wasn't government. That was anarchy's second cousin.

Why? Why? Goddamn it, *why*?

Some of it had to do with the breakdown of electronic communication. What had taken 300 years to happen to the Roman Empire was bound to happen a lot faster in a world that lived and died by data transmission. But that wasn't a sufficient explanation.

There hadn't been any overt onslaught, nor even any threat of it. For the most part the Entities had remained immured within their

own invulnerable starships, issuing no statements, making no demands. What was the secret of their power? The Colonel yearned to know; for until you begin to understand your enemy, you have not a grasshopper's chance of defeating him, and it was the Colonel's hope above all else to live to see the world free again. That was something he could not help wanting, folly though the notion probably was. It was in his bones; it was in his genes.

And so when an opportunity presented itself for him to go right into the lair of the enemy and look him in the glittering yellow eye, he seized the chance.

No one was quite able to say by what channels the invitation had come forth from them. The Entities did not speak to human beings in any of the languages of Earth; essentially, they did not speak at all. But somehow, somehow, their wishes were communicated. And they communicated a wish now to have two or three intelligent, perceptive Earthlings come aboard their Southern California flagship for a meeting of the minds.

And so. The Liberation Army chose Joshua Leonards, for his anthropological wisdom. Peter Carlyle-Macavoy, for general savvy and scientific insight. Plus Colonel Anson Carmichael III (U.S. Army, Ret.) for any number of reasons.

"Is it a trap?" Leonards asked. "I heard this morning that they let five people on board a ship in Budapest last month. They never came out again."

"Are you saying you want to back out?" Carlyle-Macavoy asked.

"If they don't let us out, we can study them from within while they study us," said Leonards. "That's fine with me."

"And you, Colonel?"

The Colonel grinned. "I'd surely hate to spend the rest of my life aboard that ship. But I'd hate it worse to spend the rest of my life knowing that I could have gone in there but I said no."

The big hatch in the immense shining starship's side opened. Leonards entered first, then Carlyle-Macavoy, then the Colonel. "Here we go," Leonards said. "The three musketeers."

The Colonel's mind was full of the questions he hoped to ask. All were variations on *Where have you come from and why are you here and what do you plan to do with us?* but they were couched in an assortment of marginally more indirect conceptualizations. Such as: Were the Entities representatives of a galactic confederation of worlds? If so, would the entry of Earth into that confederation be possible, either now or at some time in the future? And was there any intention of working toward more constructive human-Entity communication? And did they understand that their presence here, their interference with human institutions and the functioning of human economic life, had caused great distress to the inhabitants of a peaceful and by its own lights civilized world?

But the Colonel did not, of course, get to ask any of them.

Once within the alien ship he was swallowed up in a world of bewildering light, out of which a pair of mountainous alien figures came swimming gracefully toward him amidst veils of even greater brightness. They moved in an air of glory. Long flickers of cold flame rose up about them.

As soon as he was able to see clearly, he was startled to discover that they were *beautiful*. Awesome, yes. Frightening, perhaps. But in the subtle opalescent shimmer of their glossy translucent integuments and the graceful eddying of their movements and the mellow liquid gaze of their great eyes there lay a potent and ineffable beauty — a delicacy of form, even — that surprised him with its benign impact.

You could disappear into the shining yellow seas of those eyes. You could vanish into the pulsing radiant luminosity of their powerful intelligences, which surrounded them like whirling capes of light, an aura that partook of something close to the divine. You were overwhelmed by that. You were amazed. You were humbled. You were suffused with a sensation that hovered bewilderingly midway between terror and love.

"Well," the Colonel wanted to say, "Here we are. We're very happy to have been given the opportunity to —"

But he did not say that, or anything else. The meeting that took place in that vestibule of the starship was defined, mostly, by what

did not happen.

The three human delegates were not asked their names, nor given any chance to offer them. The two Entities who had come forth to interview them likewise proffered no introductions. There was no pleasant little speech of welcome by the hosts nor expression of gratitude for the invitation by the delegates. Cocktails and canapes were not served. Ceremonial gifts were not exchanged. The visitors were not taken on a tour of the ship.

No questions were asked, no answers given.

What did happen was that the Colonel and his two companions stood side by side in awe and wonder and utter stunned silence before the two extraterrestrial titans for a long moment, an infinitely prolonged moment. And then, gradually, each of the three humans found himself dwindling away within, experiencing in the most excruciating fashion an utter diminution and devaluation of the sense of self-worth that he had painstakingly constructed during the course of a lifetime of hard work, study, and outstanding accomplishment. The

Colonel felt dwarfed, and not just in the physical sense, by these eerie giants. The Colonel felt deflated and impaired — shriveled, almost. Reduced in every way. It was like becoming a small child again, confronted by stern, vast, incomprehensible, omnipotent, and distinctly unloving parents.

This was the experience that had already become known to its recipients as the Touch. It was caused by the silent and non-verbal penetration of a human mind by the mind of an Entity.

Had the Entities, the Colonel wondered afterward, really intended any such humiliation of their human guests? Perhaps that had been the whole purpose of the meeting: a reinforcement of the fact of their superiority. On the other hand, they had established that fact pretty damned thoroughly already. Why bother to make the point again in this fashion? When you've conquered a world overnight without lifting a tentacle in anger, you have no real need to rub it in. More likely the depressing effect of the meeting had merely been an inevitable thing: they are what they are, we are what we are, and when we stand before them we must unavoidably feel inferior. But that was a cheerless insight.

The Touch, the Colonel already knew, was usually followed by the Push. Which was the exertion of mental pressure by an Entity against an infiltrated human mind, for the purpose of achieving something beneficial to the general welfare of the Entities.

The Colonel felt something — he could not say what, but he felt it, felt himself somehow nudged, no, taken hold of and gently but firmly *shoved*, he knew not where — and then it was over. Over and gone and already becoming a non-event. But in the moment of that sensation the meeting, such as it had been, had reached its consummation. The Colonel saw that plainly. It was clear, from that point on, that they had already had whatever there was going to be, that the whole content of the meeting would be the Touch followed by the Push. A meeting of minds, indeed, in the most literal sense, but not a very satisfying one for the human delegates. No discussions of any sort. No exchange of statements, no discussion of aims and intents, most certainly no negotiations of any kind. And now, plainly, they were dismissed.

Another lengthy gray span of time went by, one more timeless kind of period in which nothing in particular took place, an absence of incident or even awareness; and then he and Leonards and Macavoy found themselves standing outside the ship again, reeling like drunkards but gradually getting themselves under control.

For some while none of them spoke.

"Well!" Leonards said, finally. "And so now we know," said Carlyle-Macavoy, and Leonards said the same thing half an instant later. "Now we know, all right," said the Colonel.

He found himself oddly unable to make eye contact with them; and they too were looking anywhere but straight at him. But then they all came together in a rush like the fellow survivors that they were; they

wrapped their arms around each other's shoulders, burly little Leonards in the middle and the two taller men close against him; and in a lurching, staggering way, not without laughter, they went blundering like some deranged six-legged creature across the barren brown field to the car that was waiting for them beyond the boundary of the Entities' compound.

The Colonel was glad to have escaped with his sanity and independence of mind intact. He saw now even more clearly than before that the Entities could do as they pleased with us; that they had powers so supreme that it was impossible even to describe them, let alone to comprehend them, and certainly not to do battle against them. That would be pure madness, the Colonel thought, doing battle against such creatures as these.

And yet it was not in him to accept that idea.

He still carried within himself, embedded in his awareness of the hopelessness of resistance, a congenital unwillingness to accede to the eternal slavery of mankind. Despite everything he had just experienced, he intended to fight on and on, in whatever fashion he could, against these invaders. Those were not compatible concepts, his awareness of the enemy's utter supremacy and his desire to defeat them anyway. The Colonel found himself skewered by that irresolvable incompatibility. And knew that he must remain so skewered until the end of his days, forever denying within himself that thing which he knew beyond all doubt could not be denied.

And now it was Christmas eve, and they had had their festive dinner just as though all was right in the world. Then, when a glossy after-dinner glow had come over everybody, the Colonel rose and announced, "Okay, now. Time to get down to brass tacks, folks."

Anse sat up tensely. Carole, sitting opposite him, had a glazed look of satiation. His brother-in-law Doug Gannett, untidy and uncouth as always, appeared to be asleep. Rosalie might have been dozing too. Ronnie, wide awake but looking even more than usually flushed from all the wine he had had, was nuzzling up against Peggy Gabrielson, who did not appear to mind.

The Colonel said, launching right into things in a crisp, fluent way that suggested that these were well-rehearsed words, "I think you all know that I've moved quite some distance out of retirement since the beginning of the invasion crisis. I'm active in Southern California liberation-front circles and I'm in touch, as much as it's possible to be, with such sectors of the former national government as still are operating in the eastern states. Contact is very iffy, you know. But news does reach me from time to time about what's going on back there. For example: within the past five weeks New York City has been completely shut down and sealed off."

"You mean, some kind of travel interdiction?" Anse said.

"A total one. The George Washington Bridge — that's the one across the Hudson River — has been severed. The subway system is kaput. The tunnels from New Jersey have been plugged. Highways leading into the city are blocked. The airports, of course, haven't been functioning for quite some time."

"What about the people who live there?" Ronnie asked. "What are they going to be eating from now on? Each other?"

"Pretty much the whole population of New York is now living in the surrounding states," the Colonel said. "They were given three days' notice to evacuate, and apparently most of them did."

Anse whistled. "Jesus! The mother of all traffic jams!"

"Exactly. A few hundred thousand people were either physically incapable of leaving or just didn't believe the Entities were serious, and they're still in there. I suppose they'll gradually starve. The rest, seven million suddenly homeless people, are living in refugee camps in New Jersey and Connecticut, or as squatters wherever they find vacant housing, or in tents, or however."

Doug Gannett, who, as it turned out, had not been asleep, said now, "It's a madhouse there. I got the story from a hacker in Cleveland.

People killing each other right and left to find food and shelter. Plus it's twenty degrees back there now and snowing every third day and thousands are freezing to death in the woods."

The Colonel said, "Okay. What if they were to do the same thing to L.A.? Give everybody a couple of days to clear out, let's say, and then interdict all the freeways and cut the place off totally from the surrounding counties."

There were gasps of shock. There were cries of incredulity.

"Do you think this is about to happen, Dad?" Ronnie asked.

"Who knows? But there's no reason why it can't — next month, next week, tomorrow. Just consider it: a tremendous chaotic migration of refugees, everyone looking out for himself, to hell with the consequences. A million people go west to Malibu and Topanga, and a million more cross into Van Nuys and Sherman Oaks, and all the rest of them head for Orange County. What will it be like? You haven't forgotten the Troubles, have you? This will be ten times worse."

Anse said, "What are you trying to tell us, Dad?"

"I want you all moving up here to the ranch before it happens."

Anse had never before seen them all look so nonplussed. Bewildered faces, astonished murmurs, wide-eyed stares.

The Colonel overrode it all, his voice firm and strong. "We have plenty of space here, and there are outbuildings that can easily be converted to additional residential units. We have our own well. With a little sweat we can make ourselves self-sufficient so far as food goes. Our position up here on the side of the mountain is a good strategic one, easily fortified and defended. We —"

"Hold it, Dad. Please. Are you seriously asking us to abandon our houses, our jobs, our *lives* —"

"What jobs? What lives?" There was a sudden whipcrack tone in the Colonel's voice. "There isn't one of you, is there, who's still got the same job they had the day before the Entities came. Or goes about any other part of their daily life in remotely the same way. And what about your houses? Those nice pretty suburban houses of yours, Anse, Rosalie, Paul, Helena? With the whole population of central Los Angeles flooding down your way to look for a place to sleep, and everybody angry because their neighborhood got sealed off and yours didn't, what's going to become of your cute little towns? No. No. I want you here, where you'll be safe."

Paul Carmichael, with one comforting arm across his sister's shoulders, said, level-headed as always, "I don't have any doubt, Uncle Anson, that we'd be better off up here if what was done in New York happens in L.A. But just how likely is that? The Entities could shut down New York just by cutting half a dozen transportation arteries. Closing off Los Angeles would be a lot more complicated."

The Colonel nodded. He moistened his lips thoughtfully.

"They could do it if they wanted to. I don't know whether they do: nobody does. Let me tell you, though, one further thing that may affect your decision."

Everyone was staring at him.

The Colonel said, "As I told you, I've been privy to a great deal of information that circulates in Resistance circles. I don't intend to share any classified details with you, obviously. But what I can tell you is that certain factions within the Resistance are considering making a very serious attempt at a military strike against an Entity compound right after the new year. It's a stupid and dangerous idea and I hope to God that it never comes to pass. But if it does, it will certainly fail, and then the Entities will beyond any doubt retaliate, and may the Lord help us all, then. Chaos beyond belief will be the result and you, wherever you may be at the time, will wish that you had taken me up on my offer to move up here. That's all I'm going to say. The rest is up to you."

He looked around the room, steely-eyed, fierce, almost defiant, every inch the commanding officer. "Well?" he said. He was looking straight at Anse. Who sat silent, stymied, stuck.

Then came a cheerful voice from the corner:

"I'm with you, Dad. This is the only place to be."

Ronnie. Uttering words that fell on the astounded Anse like thunder.

"That's wonderful, Ronnie. What about the rest of you, now? Doug,

Paul, you guys are both computer experts. I don't know beans about computers, and I need to. We get a little on-line communication with other places here, but it isn't nearly enough. If you were living here, you could click right into the Resistance net and do some very necessary programming for us. Rosalie, you're with a money broker of some sort now, is that right? In the next stage of the breakdown of society you could probably help us figure out how to cope with the changes that will be coming. And you, Anse —"

"I think I could use a little fresh air," Anse said.

He went outside and stood looking down at little Santa Barbara, and imagined that it was gigantic Los Angeles, and imagined that city in flames, its freeways impenetrably blocked, vast armies of refugees on the march, heading toward his very street. Swarms of gleeful Entities floating along behind them, herding them along.

He thought of his children in the midst of it all. Gunfire in the street, fires raging on the horizon, black smoke filling the sky, maddened hordes of people converging on Costa Mesa, his very district: hundreds of thousands of people from Torrance and Carson and Long Beach and Gardena and Culver City and Redondo Beach and all those million other places that made up the giant amoebic thing that was Los Angeles, people driven from their own homes by Entity edict and now proposing to take shelter in his. And there were Jill and Mike and Charlie peeking hesitantly out from behind him on the porch, mystified, frightened, their faces completely bloodless, asking plaintively, "Daddy, Daddy, why are there so many people on our street, what do they want, why do they look so unhappy?" While Carole, from within the house, called to him again and again, a strangled terrified moan, "Anse ... Anse ... Anse ... Anse ..."

It would never happen. Never. Never never never. It was just the old man's wild apocalyptic fantasy. Probably he was having Vietnam flashbacks again.

Even so, Anse was surprised to find that he had somehow decided to move to the ranch after all, in the time it took him to walk back from the edge of the patio to the door of the house. And he discovered, too, once he was inside, that all the others had come to the same decision also.

Christmas morning,
very early. The Colonel lay dreaming. He was dreaming of that happy time right after the war, reunited with his family at last, his children around him and his wife in his bed every night in that pretty little rented house in that cheery Maryland suburb. The Johns Hopkins days, getting his doctorate, working toward it in the library all day, then coming home to robust little Anse, who was always ten or eleven in the dreams, and Rosalie, a pretty little girl in smudged jeans, and Ron, no more than two and already with that rascal gleam in his eye. And best of all Irene, still healthy, young, just turned thirty and delicious to look at, strong sturdy thighs, high taut breasts, long dazzling spill of golden hair. She was coming toward him now, smiling, radiant, wearing nothing but a filmy little amethyst-colored negligee

But, as ever, he remained on the edge of wakefulness even while asleep. The soft bleeping of the telephone by the bedside sounded, the private line, and by the second ring Irene and her negligee were gone and the phone was in his hand.

"Carmichael."

"General Carmichael, it's Sam Bacon." The former Senate Majority Leader, now one of the ranking civilian officials of the California Army of Liberation. "Sorry to be awakening you so early on Christmas day, but—"

"There's probably a good reason, Senator."

"I'm afraid there is. Word has just come through from Denver. They're going to do the laser thing after all."

"The stupid fucking sons of bitches," said the Colonel.

"Ah ... yes. Definitely." Bacon seemed a little taken aback at the sound of such colorful language, coming from the Colonel.

"They've seen Joshua Leonards' report, and Peter's comments too, and they're going to go ahead with it anyway. They've got some anthropologist who says that if only for symbolic reasons we need to begin some sort of counteroffensive against the Entities, and now that we have the actual capacity to do so ..."

"Symbolic lunacy," the Colonel said.

"We all second that, sir."

"When will it happen?"

"They're being very cagey. But we've intercepted a message from the Colorado center to their adjuncts in Montana that seems pretty clearly to say that it'll be about seven days from now."

"Shit. Shit. Shit."

"We've notified the President, and he's sending a countermanding order through to Denver."

"The President," said the Colonel, making that sound like an obscenity also. "Why don't they notify God, too? And the Pope. And Professor Einstein. Denver isn't going to pay any attention to countermanding orders that come out of Washington. Washington's ancient history. You know that, Senator. What we need to do is get somebody into Denver ourselves and disable that damned laser trigger ourselves before they can use it."

"I concur. But we have some serious opposition right within our own group."

"On the grounds that an act of sabotage aimed against our beloved liberation-front comrades in Denver is treason against humanity in general, is that it?"

"Not exactly. The opposition comes on straight military grounds, I'm afraid. General Brackenridge. General Comstock. They believe that the Denver laser strike is a good and proper thing to attempt at this present time."

"Jesus Christ," the Colonel said. "I'm outvoted, Sam?"

"I'm sorry to say that you are, sir."

The Colonel's heart sank. He had been afraid of this.

Brackenridge had once been something fairly high up in the Marines. Comstock was a Navy man. Even a Navy man could be a general in the new Army of Liberation. They were both much younger than the Colonel; they had never had any combat experience whatsoever, not even police actions in third-world boondocks. But they had two votes to his one in the military arm of the executive committee.

The Colonel had suspected they would take the position that they now had taken. And had fought with them about it.

Let me remind you, he had said, of an ugly bit of history. World War II, Czechoslovakia: the Czech underground managed to murder the local Nazi commander, a particularly nasty character named Reinhard Heydrich. Whereupon the Nazis rounded up every single inhabitant of the village where it had happened, a place called Lidice, executed all the men, sent the women and children to concentration camps. Don't you think the same thing is likely to happen, only at least twenty thousand times worse, if we lay a finger on one of these precious E-Ts?

They had heard him out; he had given it whatever eloquence he could muster; it had not mattered.

High above the Earth in geosynchronous orbit was a three-year-old laser-armed military satellite that the Entities had curiously failed to notice when they had neutralized the other human orbital weapons, or had not understood, or simply were not afraid of. It could shoot a beam of very potent energy at any point on Earth that passed beneath it. It had been meant, in those long ago idyllic pre-Entity days of three years ago, as the United States' all-purpose global policeman, equipped with the high-tech equivalent of a very long billy-club: the ability to cut a nifty scorch-line warning across the territory of any petty country whose tin-horn despot of a ruler might suffer from a sudden attack of delusions of grandeur.

The problem was that the software that activated the satellite's deadly laser beam had been lost during the Troubles, and so the thing was simply sitting up there, idle, useless, pointlessly going around and around and around.

But now these Colorado people had discovered a backup copy of

the activator program and were proudly planning to launch a laser strike against the Denver HQ of the Entities.

The Colonel said, "So there's no way, diplomatic or otherwise, of preventing them from launching the strike?"

"It doesn't seem so, no."

"Oh, the damned fools," said the Colonel quietly. "The hotheaded suicidal idiots!"

About seventeen hours later, on the other side of the world, someone in the Denver command headquarters of the Colorado Freedom Front keyed three handshake commands into a ten-year-old desktop computer, waited for and got a response from space, and keyed in four more commands. This time they were the signals that would activate the laser cannon in orbit 22,000 miles overhead.

These commands required acknowledgment, which came, and repetition, which was given.

From the military overhead there now instantly descended a crackling bolt of energy in the form of an intensely focused beam of light, which homed in on the compound in which the Denver Entity forces had set up their operations, and for the next ninety seconds bathed its central building in flame. What effect this action had on the Entities inside was impossible to determine, and, indeed, was destined never to be known.

There were two immediate retaliatory consequences.

One was that electricity began going off all over the Earth almost at once, and stayed off for the next 39 days, an outage more severe and disruptive than the Great Silence of two years before.

The other was that sealed canisters stored in eleven of the world's major cities sprang open and released microorganisms of an apparently synthetic nature that induced an infectious and highly contagious disease. The symptoms were high fever followed by structural degradation of the larger veins and arteries followed by systemic breakdown and death. There was no known treatment. Quarantines had little value. Of those infected, about a third who evidently had some sort of natural immunity threw off the fever before reaching the stage of circulatory-system breakdown, and recovered completely. The rest died within three or four days of onset.

The plague raged until July. Then it vanished as suddenly as it had come.

On the lofty, isolated hillside where Rancho Carmichael was situated, there had been no impact at all. But close to fifty percent of the world's population had perished. The actual death rate varied from country to country; but none went unscathed, and some were virtually wiped out. Across the face of the world a new kind of Great Silence had fallen, the silence of depopulation. And though some three billion human beings had somehow managed to survive, very few of them had any further inclination to attempt or even consider hostile action against the alien conquerors of Earth.

It was twelve years, now, since the Conquest. The Colonel, waiting out on the ranch-house porch for the members of the Resistance Committee to assemble for the monthly meeting, believed himself to be awake. But these days he moved all too easily between the world of sun light and the realm of shadows, and as he sat there rocking, lost in swirling daydreams, it wasn't easy for him to be sure which side of the line he was really on.

It was a bright, clear April day. The air was warm and vibrant, and the hills were thick with a dense, lush growth of tall green grass that soon would be taking on its tawny summertime hue.

A bad business, all that thick grass. Great fuel for the autumn fire season, once it dried out.

The fires ... the fires ...

The Colonel's drowsy mind drifted backward across the years to

show him Los Angeles burning, the day the Entities came. The angry, reddened sky, the leaping tongues of flame, the terrifying black column of smoke rising toward the stratosphere. Houses exploding like firecrackers. The plucky little firefighting planes soaring above the holocaust, trying to get down close enough to do some good with their cargoes of water and fire-retardant chemicals.

His brother Mike aboard one of those planes, threading a difficult course through the treacherous upgusts of heat and wind ...

Be careful, Mike ... please, Mike ...

"It's okay, grandpa. I'm right here."

The Colonel's eyes opened. No fires, no little planes tossing about. Just cloudless sky, green hills, a tall fair-haired boy standing beside him. Anse's son, that one was. The nicer one.

"Did I say something?"

"You called my name. 'Mike,' you said. 'Be careful, Mike!' Were you having a dream?"

"I might have been, yes. What time is it?"

"Half past one. My father sent me out to tell you that the Resistance meeting is about ready to get going."

A moment later Anse himself appeared, coming slowly toward them across the flagstone patio. His limp seemed a little worse than usual today. The Colonel sometimes wondered whether it was all just an act, that limp of Anse's, an excuse to do a little extra drinking. But then he recalled the white shard of bone jutting through Anse's flesh after the horse had fallen on him three years back, down by the steep trail to the well. The hellish sweaty hour as he and Ronnie struggled to clean the wound and set the fracture, amateur surgeons working without benefit of anesthesia.

"What's going on?" Anse asked the boy gruffly. "Didn't I tell you to bring your grandfather inside for the meeting?"

"Grandpa was asleep. I didn't feel good about waking him."

"Not sleeping, boy," said the Colonel, "just dozing."

"Seemed mighty like sleep to me, grandpa. You were dreaming, and you called out my name."

"Not his name," the Colonel explained to Anse. "Mike's."

Anse turned to his son and said, "He means his brother. The one you were named for."

The boy said, "I know. The one who died in battle against the Entities."

"He died battling a fire that the Entities happened to start, by accident," the Colonel said. "Not quite the same thing." He knew it was hopeless. The legends were already entrenching themselves; a few more years and no one would know fact from fantasy.

"Come on," Anse said, offering the Colonel a hand. "Let's go inside, Dad."

The Colonel shook the hand away. "I can manage," he said testily. He was 74, and usually felt a lot older than that these days. But there were no medicines any more that could turn back the clock for you when you began to get old, and doctoring was practiced now, mostly, by people without training who looked things up in whatever medical books they might have on hand and hoped for the best.

They walked slowly into the house, the stiff-jointed old man and the limping younger one. A cloudy aura of alcohol fumes surrounded Anse like a helmet.

"Leg bothering you a lot?" the Colonel asked.

"Comes and goes. Some days worse than others."

"And a little booze helps, does it? You know, I wish you'd take it easier on the drinking, son."

Anse hesitated for just a beat before replying, and the Colonel knew that he was fighting off anger.

"I wish a lot of things were different from what they are, but they aren't going to be," Anse said tightly. "We do what we can to get through the day. — Mind the door, dad. Here you go. Here."

The members of the Resistance Committee — they had changed the name of it a few years back; Army of Liberation had begun to seem much too grandiose — rose as the Colonel entered. A tribute to the valiant old chairman, yes. However pathetic the valiant old chairman had become, however superannuated. Anse did most of the work these days, Anse and Ronnie. But Anson Senior, the Colonel,

was still chairman, at least in name. He acknowledged the accolade with a cool smile, stiff little nods to each of them.

"Gentlemen," he said. "Please ... sit, if you will ..."

He stood. He could still do that much. Square-shouldered, straight-backed as ever. Much less the sleepy oldster nodding off on the porch, now, much more the keen-minded military strategist of decades past, the vigorous and incisive planner, the shrewd leader of men, the enemy of self-deception and failure of inner discipline and all the other kinds of insidious moral sloppiness.

Looking toward Anse, the Colonel said, "Is everybody here?"

"All but Jackman, who couldn't swing an exit permit from L.A. because of a labor-requisition reassignment, and Quarles, whose sister seems to have started keeping company with a quisling and who therefore doesn't think it's a smart idea for him to come up here for the meeting today."

Most of the committee members were present. His sons Anse and Ronnie; his son-in-law Doug Gannett; his nephew Paul. With the Carmichael ranch standing high and safe above everything, all alone on its mountainside, untouched by the horrors of the plague year and largely unaffected by the transformations that had overtaken the world's shrunken population in the decade since, the local Resistance Committee had become virtually a Carmichael family enterprise.

The meeting began. First the Progress Report, an account of such success as had been attained since the last meeting, especially in the way of penetrating Entity security codes and developing information that might be of value in some eventual attempt at launching an attack against the conquerors.

Dan Cantelli delivered the report today. A short, round man of about fifty, an olive grower from the Santa Ynez Valley. His entire family, parents and wife and five or six children, had perished in the Great Plague; but he had married again, a Mexican girl from Lompoc, and had four more children now.

This month's Progress was, as usual, mainly No Progress. "There was, as you know, a project under way in Seattle last month aimed at finding some means of accessing high-security internal Entity messages and diverting them to Resistance computer centers. I'm sorry to say that that project has ended in complete failure, thanks to the activities of a couple of treacherous borgmanns who wrote counter-intrusion software for the Entities. I understand that the Seattle hackers were detected and, I'm afraid, eradicated."

"Borgmanns!" muttered Ronnie bitterly. "What we need is a program that will detect and eradicate *them*!"

The Colonel leaned over to Anse and whispered, "Borgmanns? What the devil are borgmanns?"

"Quislings," Anse said. "The worst kind, too, because they don't just work for the Entities, they actively aid and abet them. They're computer experts who show the Entities ways of spying on us, and teach them how to keep our hackers out of Entity computers. The name came from someone in Europe who was the first to break through into the Entity computer net and offer them his services."

Borgmanns. *Traitors*. There had always those, in every era of history. Some flaw in human nature, impossible to extirpate.

A new vocabulary was springing up. Just as Vietnam had produced words like "ragging" and "hootch" and "gook" and "Victor Charlie" that no one except old men like him remembered now, so, too, did the Conquest seem to be producing its set of special words. *Entity*. *Borgmann*. *Quisling*. Although that last one, he reflected, was actually a retreat from Second World War days.

Cantelli finished his report. Ronnie now stood up and delivered his, dealing with the Colonel's own pet enterprise, the establishment of underground educational facilities intended to instill a passion for the ultimate rebirth of human civilization in the younger generation. What the Colonel called "*inner resistance*," a sort of holding action, aimed at the maintenance of the old patriotic traditions, a belief in the ultimate providence of God, a determined resolve to transmit to future Americans some sense of the old-line American values, so that when we finally did get the Entities off our backs

we would still have some recollection of what we had been before they came.

The Colonel was only too aware of the irony of placing Ronnie in charge of any project centered around such concepts as the ultimate providence of God and the maintenance of grand old patriotic American traditions. But Ronnie had volunteered for the assignment with a hearty if somewhat suspicious show of enthusiasm. He spoke now with eloquence and zeal of what was being done by way of sending out instructional material to groups in Sacramento, San Francisco, and elsewhere. He made it sound as though he believed there really was some point in it.

And there was. There was. Even in this strange new world of borgmanns and quislings, where people seemed to be falling all over themselves in their eagerness to collaborate with the Entities. You had to keep on working toward what you knew to be right, even so, the Colonel thought. Just as in the era of hooches and fraggings and gooks and the other fleeting terminology of that misbegotten war, there still had been sound reasons for taking action to contain the spread of imperialist Communism throughout the world, however cockeyed in actuality our involvement in Vietnam might have been.

Ronnie sat down. Paul was speaking now, some item of new business, something about a roster, a worldwide census, of Entities. Someone had collected, sifted, collated, and analyzed a mass of fragmentary espionage reports from the far corners of the world and had concluded that the total number of Entities currently to be found on Earth was —

"Excuse me," the Colonel said, finding himself lost as Paul went rattling onward with a flurry of correlatives and corollaries. "What was that number again, Paul?"

"Nine hundred, plus or minus some, as stated. You understand I'm speaking just of the big tubular kind, the purplish squid-like ones with the spots, the dominant form. We haven't tried to come up with figures for the other two types, the Spooks and the Behemoths."

"Hold it," said the Colonel. "How can anybody have come up with a reliable count of the Entities when they

hide in their compounds most of the time, and when there doesn't seem to be any way of telling one from another in the first place?"

There was some murmuring in the room at that.

Paul said, his voice oddly gentle, "I've just pointed out, Uncle Anson, that the numbers are only approximate, the result mainly of stochastic analysis. But they're based on careful observations of the traffic flow in and around their various compounds. The figure we have isn't entirely hard and precise, but we're confident that it's close enough."

"It took just a thousand of them to conquer the entire Earth?"

"It did seem like more, when it was happening. But that was evidently an illusion. A deliberately induced exaggeration."

"I don't trust these numbers," said the Colonel stubbornly.

Sam Bacon said, in a tone just as patient and gentle as Paul's had been, "The point is, Anson, that even if the numbers are off by as much as 300 percent, there can only be a few thousand dominant-level Entities on this planet altogether. Which brings up the question of a campaign of attrition aimed against them, a program of steady assassination that will in time eliminate the entire —"

"Assassination?" the Colonel cried, aghast. He came up out of his chair like a rocket.

"Guerrilla warfare, yes," Bacon said. "Picking them off one by one with sniper attacks, until—"

"Wait a second," said the Colonel. "Just wait." He was trembling, suddenly. He started to sway and clamped his fingers down hard into Anse's shoulder. "I don't like where we're heading, here. Does any of you seriously think we're anywhere near ready to begin a program of ... of ..."

He began to falter. They were all looking at him, and they seemed uneasy. He heard some muttering, but he kept on going.

"For the moment," he said, "let's pass over the fact that nobody, so far as we know, has ever managed to assassinate as many as one Entity, and here we are talking of knocking the whole bunch of them off. Maybe we should call for opinions from Generals Brackenridge and Comstock before we get any deeper into this."

"Brackenridge and Comstock are both dead, Dad," Anse said.

"Don't you think I know that? Died in the Plague, both of them, and the Plague, I remind you, is something that the Entities handed us in reprisal for that Denver laser attack. Now you want to get snipers out there who'll start shooting down the whole population of Entities one at a time in the streets, without stopping to consider what they would do to us if we killed even a single one of them? I fought that notion then, and I'm going to fight it again today. It's too soon to try any such thing. If they killed off half the world's population the last time, what will they do now?"

"They won't kill us all off, Anson," said someone on the far side. Faulkenburg, a rancher from Santa Maria, slab-jawed, cold-eyed, vehement. "The last time, when they sent the Plague, it was as a warning to us not to try any more funny business. And we haven't. But they won't kill us off like that again. They need us too much. We're their labor supply. They'll get nasty, sure. But they won't get *that* nasty."

"How can you know that?" the Colonel demanded.

"A second round of the Plague would just about exterminate us all. I don't think that's what they want. But we can kill all of them. Only 900, Paul says, maybe a thousand? One by one, we'll get them all, and when they're gone we're a free planet again. It's high time we got under way. If not now, when?"

"There's a whole planet of them somewhere," said the Colonel. "We knock off a few, and they'll send some more."

"From 40 light-years away? That'll take time. Meanwhile we'll get ready for their next visit. And when they arrive—"

"Craziness," the Colonel said, subsiding into his seat. "You don't understand the first thing about our true situation."

He was quivering with anger. The room had grown very silent, a silence that had a peculiar, almost electric, intensity.

Then it was broken by another voice from the other side of the room: "I ask you, Anson—" The Colonel looked across. Cantelli. "I ask you, sir: what kind of resistance movement do you think we have here, if we don't ever dare to resist?"

"Hear! Hear!" Faulkenburg again.

The Colonel began to reply, but then he realized he was not sure of his answer, though he knew there had to be a good one.

"He's always been a pacifist at heart, really," someone murmured. "Hates the Entities, but hates fighting even more. And doesn't even see the contradictions in his own words. What kind of soldier is that?"

No, the Colonel roared, though no sound came from him. *Not so. Not so.*

"He had all the right training," said someone else. "But he was in Vietnam. That changes you, losing a war."

"I don't think it's that," came a third voice. "It's just that he's so old. All the fight's gone out of him."

Were they, he wondered, actually saying these things, right out loud in his very presence? Or was he simply imagining them?

"Hey, wait just one goddamned second!" the Colonel cried, trying once more to get to his feet and not quite succeeding. He felt a hand on his wrist. Then another. Anse and Ronnie, flanking him.

"Dad—" Anse said, that same soft, gentle, infuriatingly condescending tone. "A little fresh air, maybe? That always perks a person up, don't you think?" And led him outside again.

The warm springtime sun, the lush green hills. A little fresh air, yes. Always a good idea. Perks a person up.

The Colonel's head was spinning. He felt very shaky.

"Just take it easy, dad. You'll be all right in a minute."

"Don't fret over me. I'll be okay," the Colonel said. "You go back inside, Ron. Keep hammering away at the reprisal issue."

"Right. Right. Here — you sit right here, dad—"

His mind seemed to be clearing, a little.

A disheartening business, in there. He recognized the sound of blind determination in the face of all logic when he heard it. The old,



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old story: they saw the light at the end of the tunnel, or thought they did. And so they would, the Colonel knew, make the Denver mistake a second time, no matter what arguments he raised. And would produce the catastrophic Denver result again, too.

And yet, and yet, Cantelli had a point: How could they call themselves a Resistance, if they never resisted? Why these endless, useless meetings? What were they waiting for? When were they going to strike? Was it not their goal to rid the world of these mysterious invaders, who, like thieves in the night, had stolen all purpose from human existence without offering a syllable of explanation?

Yes. That was the goal. Kill them all, reclaim our world.

Then why let any more time go by before beginning the struggle? Were we getting any stronger as the years went by? Were the Entities growing weaker?

A hummingbird shot past him, a brilliant flash of green and red, not much bigger than a butterfly. Two hawks were circling far overhead, dark swooping things high up against the blinding brightness of the sky. A couple of small children had emerged from somewhere, a boy and a girl, and stood staring in silence at him. Six or seven years old. His youngest grandson, Ronnie's boy. The latest model Anson Carmichael: the fifth to bear that name, he was. And the girl? Jill, was she, Anse's daughter? No. Too young for that. This had to be Paul's daughter, the Colonel supposed. What was her name? Cassandra? Something fancy like that.

"The thing is," the Colonel said, as though picking up a conversation broken off only a little while before, "that you must never forget that Americans were free people once, and when you grow up and have children of your own you'll need to teach them that."

"Just Americans?" the boy asked, the young Anson.

"No, others too. Not everyone. Some peoples never knew what freedom was. But we did. Americans are all we can think about now, I guess. The others will have to get free on their own."

They were looking at him strangely, big-eyed, bewildered.

"I don't really know how it's going to come about," he went on. "But we must never forget that it has to come about, someday, somehow. There has to be a way, but we haven't discovered it yet. And meanwhile, while we're biding our time, we have to remember who and what we once were. Do you hear me?"

Blank looks. They didn't understand. Too young, perhaps? No. No. They ought to be old enough to grasp these ideas. He certainly had, when he was their age and his father was explaining to him the reasons why the country had gone to war in Korea. But these two had never known the world to be anything other than this. They had nothing to compare it with, no yardstick by which to measure the notion of "freedom." And so, as time went along and the ones who remembered the old kind of world gave way to these children, that notion would be lost forever.

Would it? Would it, really?

If no one ever lifted a finger against the Entities, then, yes, it would. Something *had* to be done. Something. But what?

Right now there was nothing they could do. He had said so many times: *The world is the toy of the Entities. They are omnipotent and we are weak.* And so it was likely to remain, until somehow — he could not say how — we were able to change things. Then, when we had waited long enough, when we were ready to strike, we would strike, and we would prevail.

Wasn't that so?

Afternoon shadows were gathering. The day was growing a little cool. He might have been dozing again. Paul's young daughter seemed to have wandered off, but the other child, little Anson, was still with him, gazing solemnly at him as though wondering how anybody so old could continue to find the strength to breathe.

Then Ronnie appeared from within, and instantly the boy went running toward him. Ronnie swept him off his feet, tossed him high, caught him and tossed him again. The boy squealed with pleasure.

Ronnie put him down and said to the Colonel, "Well, Dad, the meeting's over, and you'll be happy to hear how things turned out."

"The meeting?"

"The Resistance Committee meeting, yes," said Ronnie gently.

"Yes, of course. What other meeting would it have been? — You don't think I've gone senile yet, do you, boy? No, don't answer that. Tell me about the meeting."

"We just finished taking the vote. It went your way."

He tried to remember what they had been discussing in there. His mind was like molasses. Currents of thoughts stirred slowly, sullenly, within it. There were days when he still recognized himself to be Colonel Anson Carmichael III, U.S.A., Ret. Anson Carmichael Ph.D., the distinguished authority on Southeast Asian linguistics and the thought processes of non-western cultures. This was not one of those days. There were other days, days like this one, when he was barely capable of making himself believe that he once had been an alert, forceful, intelligent man.

"On the campaign of attrition," Ronnie said. "The proposed sniper program."

"Of course. ... They voted it down?" The Colonel remembered now. "I can't believe it. What changed their minds?"

"Just as the discussion was getting toward the vote, and indeed it looked mighty like the vote would be in favor of a program of ambushing Entities wherever we caught one going around by itself, Doug came out with some new information that he'd been sitting on all afternoon. Stuff he pulled in from an on-line operation working out of Vancouver, which got it from those Seattle hackers just before the borgmanns spilled the beans on them." Ronnie paused. "You're following all this, aren't you, dad?"

"I'm with you. Go on. This Vancouver information ..."

"Well, apparently there have been sniper attempts on Entities already, at least three of them, one in the southern United States, one in France, one somewhere else that I forget. They flopped, all three. The snipers never even managed to get off a single shot. The Entities have some kind of mental power, a mind-field that surrounds them and scans for hostile thought-emanations, and when the field detects anybody nearby who might be planning to do anything nasty to them, they just reach out and give him the Push, extra hard, and the sniper falls over dead. It's happened every time."

"What's the range of this mind-field?"

"Nobody knows. Wide enough to pick up the mental broadcasts of any sniper who might get within shooting range, evidently."

"Mental telepathy too," the Colonel said. He closed his eyes for a moment, shook his head slowly. "They must have animals on their planet that are more evolved than we are. — What happened when Doug revealed all this?"

"The attrition plan was tabled. Between the mind-field thing and the whole reprisal issue, we decided that there was no sense trying anything right now. Everybody but Faulkenburg agreed, and in time he came around too. Before we can launch any sort of hostile action, we need to gather more information about how their minds work. If there was some way we could neutralize that mind-field, for example—"

"Right," the Colonel said. He chuckled. His own mind was as clear now as it had been in days. "The Santa Claus approach to coping with the problem, eh? Maybe he'll bring us a mind-field neutralizer next Christmas. Or maybe he won't. At any rate, I'm glad the vote went the way it did. I was worried, for a while. I thought we were done for. I thought you were all going to shoot us clear over the brink."

Another three years since the Conquest. The Colonel was frail, now. He had grown very thin and had a tremor in his hands, and used a walking-stick when he moved about. But he spent most of his time these days sitting quietly in his chair near the edge of the patio, looking out over the valley, with a lap-robe spread across him except on the very warmest days.

Ron Carmichael said, trotting up toward the main house along the grassy path from the gray stone building that was the Resistance communications center, "Where's my father? Has anyone seen the Colonel?" The despatch from London was in his hand.

"On the patio," Jill called. She was descending the same path, on her way down to the vegetable garden with a pail for tomatoes. "In his rocking chair, as usual." But he wasn't.

The first person Ron spied within the house was his daughter Leslyn. "Where's Grandpa?" he asked. "He's not on the porch."

"Mommy's with him. In his room."

"Is something wrong?"

But the little girl had already gone skipping away. Hurrying through the maze of slate-floored corridors, Ron made his way to his father's bedroom, and found him sitting up in bed, wearing his pajamas and bathrobe and a red muffler about his throat. He seemed pallid and weary and very old. Peggy was with him.

"What's going on?" he asked her.

"He was feeling chilly, that's all. I brought him inside."

"It's a bright sunny morning! Practically like summer."

"Not for me," the Colonel said, smiling faintly. "For me it's starting to be very, very late in autumn, Ronnie, going on winter very fast. But your lovely lady is taking good care of me. Giving me my medicine, and all." He patted Peggy affectionately on the back of one hand. "I don't know what I'd do without her. What I would have done without her, these many years. . . . Is there news?" he asked, with a glance at the crumpled grayish sheet in Ron's hand.

"Yes. Amazing stuff, as a matter of fact. An Entity has been assassinated in the English town of Salisbury. Paul just picked up the story on a Net link."

The Colonel, nestling back against his mound of pillows and giving Ron a slow, steady, unflustered look, said quietly, "Just how reliable is this report, boy?"

"Paul says, unimpeachable authority, London Resistance network, Martin Bartlett himself."

"An Entity. Killed." The Colonel considered that. "How?"

"A single shot on a lonely road, late at night. Hidden sniper, using some sort of home-made grenade-firing rifle."

"The very plan that Faulkenburg and Cantelli and some of the others were so hot to put into being a few years ago, and which we ultimately voted down because it was impossible because of the telepathic screening field. Now someone's gone and done it? How?"

"Well," Ron said, "somebody found a way, somehow."

The Colonel considered that. He sat back, there among his framed diplomas and military memorabilia and innumerable photographs of his dead wife and his dead brothers and his sons and daughters and grandchildren, and he seemed to vanish into the labyrinth of his own thoughts and lose his way in there.

Then he said, "There's really only one way that would work, isn't there? The assassin would have to be like some sort of machine, practically — somebody with no more feeling than an android. Completely stolid and unexcitable. Who could wait there by the roadside holding that rifle and never for a moment let his mind dwell on the notion that he was going to strike a blow for the liberation of mankind, or for that matter that he was about to murder an intelligent creature. Or any other thought that might attract the attention of the Entity who was going to be his victim."

"A total moron," Ronnie suggested. "Or an utter sociopath."

"Well, yes. That might work, if you could teach a moron to use a rifle, or if you found a sociopath who didn't get some kind of sick kick out of the anticipation of firing that shot. But there are other possibilities, you know."

"Such as?"

"In Vietnam," said the Colonel, "we ran across them all the time: absolutely impassive people who did the goddamnedest bloody things without batting an eye. An old woman who looked like your grandmother's grandmother would come up to you and placidly toss a bomb in your car. Or a sweet little six-year-old boy putting a knife into you in the marketplace. People who'd kill or maim or mutilate you without pausing to think about what they were about to do and without feeling a gnat's worth of animosity for you as they did it. Or remorse afterward. Half

the time they blew themselves up right along with you, and that that was going to happen didn't faze them either. Perhaps it never even entered their minds. They just went ahead and did it. An Entity mind-field might not be any defense against somebody like that."

"It's hard for me to imagine a mentality like that."

"Not for me. I saw just that kind of mentality in action at very close range indeed. Then I spent much of my academic career studying it." He shook his head. "So they've actually killed one. Well, well, well. — What about reprisals, now?"

"They've cleaned out half a dozen towns nearby, London says."

"Cleaned them out? What does that mean?"

"Rounded up every person. Taken them away somewhere."

The Colonel nodded. "That's it, then? Purely local reprisal? No worldwide plagues, no major power shutdowns?"

"So far, no."

"So far," said the Colonel. "We can only pray."

It was Cassandra, in the children's compound, who heard the distant honking: three long honks, then a short one, then three more. She picked up the phone and called down to the ranch house.

"Someone at the gate. We expecting anybody?"

She could hear Charlie asking someone. Then he said, "No, nobody that we know of. Why don't you run up there and take a look, and call me back?"

"I'm six months pregnant and I'm not going to run anywhere. You find somebody else to go, you hear?"

In a few minutes she saw her young cousin Anson go past, carrying the shotgun that was always carried by anyone who went to meet unexpected callers at the gate. His face was set in that clenched, rigid way that it always took on when one of the older men gave him a job to do. Anson was a terribly responsible kind of kid. Rain or shine, you could always get him to jump to it.

"Yes?" Anson said, peeping through the gate at the strangers. The shotgun dangled casually from his hand, but he could bring it up into position in an instant. He was sixteen, tall and strapping, ready for anything.

These people didn't seem very threatening, though. A thin, tired-faced little woman about his mother's age, or even a few years older; and an unusual-looking man in his twenties, very tall and slender, with huge blue-green eyes and darkish skin and an enormous mop of shining curly hair, not quite red, not quite brown.

The woman said, "My name is Cindy Carmichael. I was Mike Carmichael's wife, long long ago. This is Khalid, who's traveling with me. We have no place to stay and we wonder if you can take us in."

"Mike Carmichael's wife," Anson said, frowning. Confusing. Mike Carmichael was his cousin's name; but Cassandra was Mike's wife.

She seemed to understand the problem. "Colonel Carmichael's brother, he was. He's dead now. — You're a Carmichael yourself, aren't you? I can tell by the eyes. What's your name?"

"Anson, ma'am."

"That was the Colonel's name, Anson. Had a son by that name too. Anse, they called him. Are you Anse's boy?"

"No, ma'am. Ron's."

"Are you, now? So Ron's a family man these days. I suppose a lot of things have changed. — Let me think: that would make you Anson the Fifth, right? Just like in a royal dynasty."

"The Fifth, yes, ma'am."

"Well, hello, Anson the Fifth. I'm Cindy the First. Can we come in, please?"

"You wait here," Anson said. "I'll go and see."

He jogged down to the main house. "Strange woman at the gate," he reported. "Some foreign-looking man with her. She says she's a Carmichael. Was married to a brother of the Colonel named Mike, once upon a time. Did the Colonel ever have a brother

named Mike?"

"Not that I know of," Charlie said.

Paul said, "How old is she? Older than I am, would you say?"

"I'd say so."

"She tell you her name?"

"Cindy, she said."

Paul's eyes grew very wide. "I'll be damned."

"So you surely will, cousin," said Ron, entering the room just then. "What's going on?"

"Apparently the ambassador from outer space has returned, and she's waiting at the gate. Cindy, I mean. Mike's wife Cindy. How about that?"

So the whole place was a Carmichael commune now, the Colonel's entire family living together on the hilltop. She felt a little outnumbered.

It was amazing to see them all again, these people who for a few years had been her kinfolk so many years ago. Not that she had ever been much more to them than Mike's crazy hippie wife, who dressed funny and talked funny and thought funny, and they had made it pretty clear that they wanted very little, if anything, to do with her. Which had basically been okay with Cindy. They had their lives; she and Mike had had theirs.

But that was then and this was now, and Mike was long gone and the world had changed beyond belief, and she had changed too, and so had they. And these people were the closest thing to family that she had left. She could not let them reject her now.

"I can't tell you how glad I am to be here. I never was much of a family person back in the old days, was I? But I'd like to be, now. I really would."

They were gawking at her as though an Entity had wandered into their house on the mountainside and was standing in their midst.

Cindy's gaze traveled around the room. She summoned up what she could remember of them.

That one had to be Ronnie, there in the middle of the group. He seemed to be running things, now. That was odd, Ronnie being in charge. She remembered him as a wild man, a trickster, an operator, always on the outside in family stuff. If anything he had been more of the black sheep of the family than she. But here he was, now, fifty years old, maybe, big and solid, grown very stocky with the years, his blond hair almost white, and you could see immediately that he had changed inwardly too, in some fundamental way, had grown stronger, steadier, in these twenty-odd years. He had never looked serious, in the old days. Now he did.

Next to him was his sister, Rosalie. A nice-looking woman then, Cindy remembered, and she had aged very well indeed, tall, stately, controlled. She had married some fat nerdy guy, a computer man. That must be him with her, Cindy thought: that big bald doughy-faced fellow.

And that one — the stringy-looking blonde woman — she must be Anse's wife. A suburban-mom type back then, somewhat high strung.

The younger man — Paul, wasn't he? Mike's other brother's son. Taught at some college south of L.A.

As for the others, four of them were kids in their middle or late twenties, and the other, the teenager, was the one who had met them at the gate. They all looked more or less alike, except for

one, clearly the oldest, who was heavysset and brown-eyed and balding already, only the faintest traces of Carmichael about him. The son of Rosalie and her computer guy, Cindy supposed. The remaining person was a woman in her late forties standing just alongside Ron. She seemed vaguely familiar to Cindy but plainly was no Carmichael, not with those dark eyes and that smallish, fine-boned frame. Ronnie's wife, most likely.

She said, as she completed her survey, "And the Colonel? What about him? Could he still be alive?"

"Could be and is," Ronnie said. "Almost eighty-five and very feeble, and I don't think he'll be with us much longer. He's going to be damned surprised to see you."

"And not very pleased, I bet. I'm sure you know he never thought very highly of me. Perhaps for good reasons."

"He'll be glad to see you now. You're his closest link with his brother Mike, you know."

Cindy nodded. "Somebody else is missing. Your brother Anse."

"Dead," Ronnie said. "Four years back."

"I'm so sorry. He was a fine man."

"He was, yes. But he had a lot of trouble with drinking, his later years. Anse wanted so much to be as strong and good as the Colonel, you know, but he never quite managed it. Nobody could have. But Anse just wouldn't forgive himself for being human."

Was there anyone else from the old days that she should ask about? Cindy didn't think so. She glanced toward Khalid, wondering what he was making out of all this. But Khalid appeared utterly placid. As though his brain had gone off on a voyage to Mars.

The woman next to Ronnie said cheerily, "I guess you don't recognize me, do you, Cindy? But of course we were only together for a very few hours."

"We were? When was that? I'm sorry."

"On the Entity spaceship, after the Porter Ranch landing. We were in the same group of prisoners." A warm smile. "Peggy Gabrielson. I came here to work for the Colonel, and later I married Ron. No reason why you would remember me."

No. There wasn't. Cindy didn't.

"You were very distinctive. I've never forgotten: the beads, the sandals, the big earrings. They let most of us go that afternoon, but you volunteered to stay with the aliens. You said they were going to take you to their planet."

"That's what I thought. But they never did," Cindy said. "I worked for them all those years, doing whatever they wanted me to do, running detainee centers for them, transporting prisoners around, waiting for them to make good on their promise. But it didn't happen. After a while I began to wonder if they had ever promised it. By now I've decided that it was all my own delusion."

"You're a quisling, then?" Ronnie asked. "Are you aware that this is a major center of the Resistance?"

"Was a quisling," she said. "Not any longer. I was working at a detention center on the Turkish coast when I realized I had wasted twenty years playing footsie with the Entities for nothing. So I arranged for a pardoner I know in Germany to have me shipped out to the States, escorting a batch of prisoners to Nevada, and he rewrote my personnel code to say that I had been killed in an auto accident between Vegas and Barstow while driving this young man to his next detention camp. That's why he's here. The pardoner rewrote his code too. We're permanent vanishes, now. When we got to L.A., I discovered that there's a wall around the place. No way for us to get in, because we don't officially exist any more."

"So then you had the notion of coming here."

"Yes. What else could I do? But if you don't want me, just say so, and I'll take off. My name is Carmichael, though. I was a member of this family once, your uncle's wife. I loved him very much and he loved me. And I'm not about to interfere with any of your Resistance activities. If anything, I can help. I can tell you a lot of stuff about the Entities that you may not know."

Ronnie was eyeing her reflectively.

"Let's go talk to the Colonel," he said.

The Colonel looked about 200 years old, Cindy thought. There didn't seem to be anything left of him but those outrageous eyes of his, blue as glaciers, sharp as lasers.

He was in bed, propped up on a bunch of pillows. He had a visible tremor and his face was haggard and deathly pale, and he appeared

to weigh about eighty pounds. His famous shock of silvery hair had thinned to mere wisps.

All around him, on both night-tables and on the wall, were family photographs and all manner of official-looking framed documents, military honors and such. The photo of Mike leaped out instantly: Mike as she remembered him, a vigorous handsome man in his fifties, out in the New Mexico desert standing next to that little plane he had loved so much, the Cessna.

"Cindy," the Colonel said, beckoning with a claw-like palsied hand. "Come here. Closer." Faint and papery as it was, it was still unmistakably the voice of the Colonel. She could never have forgotten that voice. When the Colonel said something, however mildly, it was an order. "You really are Cindy, are you?"

"Really. Truly."

"How amazing. I didn't ever imagine that I'd see you again. You know that Mike's been dead a long time, don't you?"

"I know that, yes."

"And Anse, too. You remember Anse? My older son? And my turn's next. I broke my hip last week. You don't recover from that, not at my age. I've had enough, anyway."

"I never thought I'd hear you say anything like that."

"You mean that I sound like a quitter? No. That's not it. I'm not giving up, exactly. I'm just going away. There's no preventing it, is there? We aren't designed to live forever. It's all right." He managed a sort of smile. "I'm glad you came here, Cindy."

"You are? Really?"

"I never understood you, you know. And I guess you never understood me. But we're family, all the same. My brother's wife: how could I not love you? You can't expect everybody around you to be just like yourself. Take Mike, for instance —"

He began to cough. Ronnie stepped forward quickly, snatching up a glass of water from a nearby table and offering it to him. Quietly he said, "You may be over-exerting yourself, Dad."

"No. No. All I'm doing is making a little speech." The Colonel drank deeply, let his eyes droop shut for a moment, opened them and turned them on Cindy again. "As I was saying: Mike. A martyr, I used to think, to all the cockeyed ideas that went running through American life since we went to war in Vietnam. The things he did. Quit the Air Force, ran off to L.A., married a hippie, went out to the desert to hide himself away and meditate. I didn't approve. But what business was it of mine? He was what he was."

Another deep drink of water.

"Anse. Tried his best to be someone like me. Failed at it. Burned himself out and died young. Ronnie. Rosalie. Problems, problems, problems. If my own children are this crazy, I thought, what must the rest of the world be like? One big lunatic asylum, with me stranded in it. And that was before the Entities came, even. But I was wrong. I just wanted everybody to be as stiff and stern as me, because that's how I thought people should be. Carmichaels, anyway. Warriors, dedicated to the cause of righteousness and decency." He chuckled softly. "Well, the Entities showed us a thing or two, didn't they? The good, the bad, the indifferent — we all got conquered the same day, and lived unhappily ever after."

"You never got conquered, Dad," Ronnie said.

"Is that how it seems to you? Well, maybe. Maybe." The old man had not released his grip on Cindy's hand. He said, "You went to the aliens' planet, did you?"

"No. They just kept me, all those years. Put me to work, moving me around, this compound and that, one job and another. Eventually I decided to escape."

"And come here?"

"Not at all. I didn't know I'd find anyone here. I went to L.A. But I couldn't get in, so I took a chance and came up here. This was my last resort."

"Ah." His hand reached for her wrist and drew her closer. "I went up onto the aliens' ship once myself, you know. The same ship you were on. And looked at them face to face. They're perfect super-beings, aren't they? They're just like gods. As great as gods, and as mysterious."

"Yes," she said. "That's true."

"Do they have any flaws, do you think? An Achilles heel somewhere that will let us defeat them, ultimately?"

"I wouldn't say I saw anything like that."

"No. No. I didn't either. I came away very damn humble from that meeting. But I wanted to go on resisting, all the same. Keeping the *idea* of resistance alive, anyway. The memory of what it had been like to live in a free world. Maybe we never even *did* live in a free world, anyway. God knows I heard plenty of that stuff during the Vietnam time, how the evil multinational corporations actually ran everything, or some little group of secret political masters, or whoever. All our supposed democratic freedoms just illusions designed to keep people from understanding the truth. America really a totalitarian state like all the rest. I never believed any of that. But even so, even if I was naive all my life, I want to think it's possible for the America that I used to think existed to exist again, regardless of whether it ever did the first time around. Are you following me? That it can all be reborn, that we can come out from under these slave-master Entities, that we can repair ourselves somehow and live as we were meant to live. Call it faith in the ultimate providence of God, I guess. Call it —" He paused. In a less fervent tone he said, "Some speech, eh, Cindy? The old man's farewell address. I've just about run out of steam, though. Are you going to live here with us from now on?"

"I want to."

"Good." He turned away from her, closing his eyes. For a moment she thought he had died. But then he smiled, he opened his eyes again, he winked. "We'll beat them somehow," he said. "Or outlast them. Some of us will, anyway. We'll go on and on, remembering who we once were, hiding our real selves from them, until some day they go away and leave us in peace and we can start rebuilding. Don't you think so, Cindy?" She could not find an answer to that. He understood what her silence meant. But his smile was unwavering. "Well," he said, "it's a good thing to think, anyway, isn't it? Isn't it, Cindy?"

The Colonel was long gone by the time the Entities finally did leave the world in peace, twenty-five years later. They went away. They simply went away, without a word, without a hint of what they had been up to all those years. It was the most enormous anticlimax in human history. It was a Carmichael of a different generation — the Colonel's great-grandson Frank, Anson's son, Anson the Fifth, that was — who looked up in wonder and bewilderment into the bright clear sky on the day the conquerors of Earth had so unexpectedly packed up and departed. Looked *through* the sky, to the hidden stars, to the unknown star that was the home of the Entities. He would have incinerated that star with his gaze, if he could, so hungry was he for revenge against them.

But that revenge was possible against gods who had come here and changed the world beyond recognition, and then had fled like thieves in the night?

Why, to restore the world to what it had been; and then to make it even finer than that. That was what he would do. That would be his revenge.

He thought he understood, now, what had happened to the world.

By sending us the Entities, the universe has sent us a message. The problem is that we don't know what it is. The job that faces us in the next hundred years, or five hundred, or however long it takes, is to find the meaning in the message that came to us from the stars.

And meanwhile —

Meanwhile, through some miracle, the world was free again. And now, Frank thought, someone has to step forward and say, *This is what freedom is like, this is how free people behave.* That was what the old Colonel, who had died before Frank was born, had taught them. And that was what he would do. And if all goes well, Frank told himself, if all goes well, a new world will come forth out of the rubble of the one that the Entities had abandoned. If all goes well. □

If you had a time machine, would you kill Hitler, make a killing in the stock market, or just kill time?

I BORROW DAVE'S TIME MACHINE

7:05 AM: Borrow the keys to the time machine from Dave. He's not happy I'm waking him so early, but I've only got today.

7:10 AM: 1646. Drop in on Rembrandt von Rijn. Ask him to do a painting of my cat. He's never worked from Polaroids before.

7:15 AM: 1502. Visit Leonardo da Vinci. Commission art work.

7:20 AM: 1500 on the dot. Raphael. Barely escape the Inquisition.

7:25 AM: 1894 Toulouse-Lautrec. He offers me some absinthe. Bad move before breakfast, but I need it after the Renaissance. Wake three days later dead broke and hung over.

7:31 AM: Picasso.

7:40 AM: Monet.

7:45 AM: Manet. Hope I can remember which is which.

7:47 AM: Gauguin. A total sleaze. Give him an advance, tell him not to leave the country.

7:50 AM: John Singer Sargent. Then breakfast in Victorian London. The cuisine is every bit as bad as advertised.

8:00 to 10:13 AM: Refreshed, spend a few days selling needles, pins and nails in 1600's Europe. Popular items, but unfortunately chump change. Give up. Spend a week at Sutter's Mill circa 1800, pick gold nuggets

out of the Sacramento River, then sell them in various eras. Time consuming, because I stop at home to borrow camping gear and buy trail mix and freeze-dried dinners.

10:14 to 10:57 AM: Hit the library microfilm, then win a few daily doubles at a few racetracks, not enough to attract the tax men. Invest on Wall Street, 1905. Put the profits in banks to collect interest. Find a good lawyer to will the money to me.

10:58 to 11:20 AM: Come home, learn the lawyer swindled me. He was good, but not particularly honest. Try again, new fortune, new lawyer. Works the third time.

11:21 to 11:25 AM: Pretty tired, busy morning. Take a month's vacation on the French Riviera, 1921. Fall in love, get married, have a couple of kids, get bored, abandon them. But I give them tickets to America and a hefty bank account, OK?

11:26 AM: Drop in on Lautrec. Dry him out, remind him of the commission.

11:28 AM: Check in on Van Gogh. Think about giving him Haldol long enough to do the job. Decide against it. Don't want to change history.

11:30 AM: Sargent. A true professional.

11:32 AM: Rembrandt. Looking good.

11:34 AM: Monet. Or was it Manet?

11:36 AM: The other guy.

11:40 AM: Da Vinci. I can't believe it, he

hasn't even started and it's already 1505.

11:42 AM: 1506. Still nothing.

11:44 AM: 1508. This is getting annoying.

11:46 AM to 12:15 PM: Drop home, buy a gun. The paperwork takes time. Demonstrate to Leo why he should not annoy me. Leave him very excited about ballistics and munitions. Damn.

12:18 PM: Picasso and lunch, small cafe, cheap but tasty. He draws on the tablecloth. Very nice, but I think I could do as well. Remind him we contracted for a painting.

12:20 PM: Raphael. Another professional.

12:22 PM: Gauguin. Track him down in Tahiti. Remind him we had a deal.

12:25 to 12:37 PM: Buy 12 copies of Action No.1 for Christmas gifts, and something nice from Tiffany's for Mom.

12:40 to 1:00 PM: Locate a good secure vault. Amazing, I'm ahead of schedule. Look up the kids, summer 1938. They're doing OK. Give them a few stock tips, recommend against foreign travel or investments in the near future.

1:01 to 1:48 PM: Feeling a bit warm and achy. Go forward to 2024, auto-diagnose myself — pneumonic plague. Drop back to 2002, right before managed care totally ruins medicine, get hospitalized for two weeks on intravenous antibiotics. Still barely make it. Get annoyed when they

7:47 AM: Gauguin. A total sleaze. Give him an advance, tell him not to leave the country.

keep asking where I got the plague. Leave without paying the bill. Spend a month recuperating in a Swiss sanitarium, get hooked on brandy and tobacco. Spend two months at Betty Ford, 1988, recuperating from my recuperation.

1:49 to 2:20 PM: Back to Sutter's Mill for additional gold. Run into myself looking pretty dreadful, warn me to get malaria prophylaxis. Tijuana 1982, buy chloroquine.

2:22 PM: Start picking up art. Van Gogh's *Dogs Playing Poker*. Hard on the eyes.

2:24 PM: Picasso's *Surfing the Net*. I still say I could do just as good.

2:27 to 2:34 PM: Monet's big-eyed kids and Manet's unicorn. Damn, I could have sworn I ordered it the opposite.

2:35 PM: Gauguin's *Indian Girl with Wolf*. It stinks. Tell him to do it over. Guy gives me the creeps.

2:40 PM: Give Gauguin six months, pick up the painting. Great. It could get me arrested for child porn.

2:42 PM: Da Vinci. Tell him, "Look Leo, flying machines and anatomy are fine, but after you finish the damn picture."

2:44 PM: Beg.

2:46 to 3:00 PM: Overshoot. He's on his deathbed. Drop back a couple months, give him digitalis and antibiotics, go forward again and pick up Leonardo's *Bart and Lisa*. I didn't know yellow faces could be so enigmatic.

3:02 to 3:14 PM: Lots of flea spray before going to pick up Raphael's *Madonna and Michael*. Get dermatitis and insecticide

poisoning. Two weeks in the hospital 2001. No wonder they recognized me earlier, in 2002.

3:16 to 3:24 PM: Pick up Sargent's *Elvis on Black Velvet* and Lautrec's *Hendrix* and Rembrandt's portrait of my cat Pookie. She's perched in front of tulips and a bowl of fruit and is watching a bird in a cage; surprisingly bright and cheery. I decide to keep it.

3:26 to 4:00 PM: Put the art in the vault. Every twenty years, shift the paintings back in time so they'll be properly aged. This makes for multiple copies of each piece. I keep track with Post-It notes, but still mess up and age the Raphael an extra half century.

4:02 to 4:50 PM: Check on my investments. Drop back to buy extra Sony and Microsoft. Leak the vault's presence to the media. Go forward 10 years,

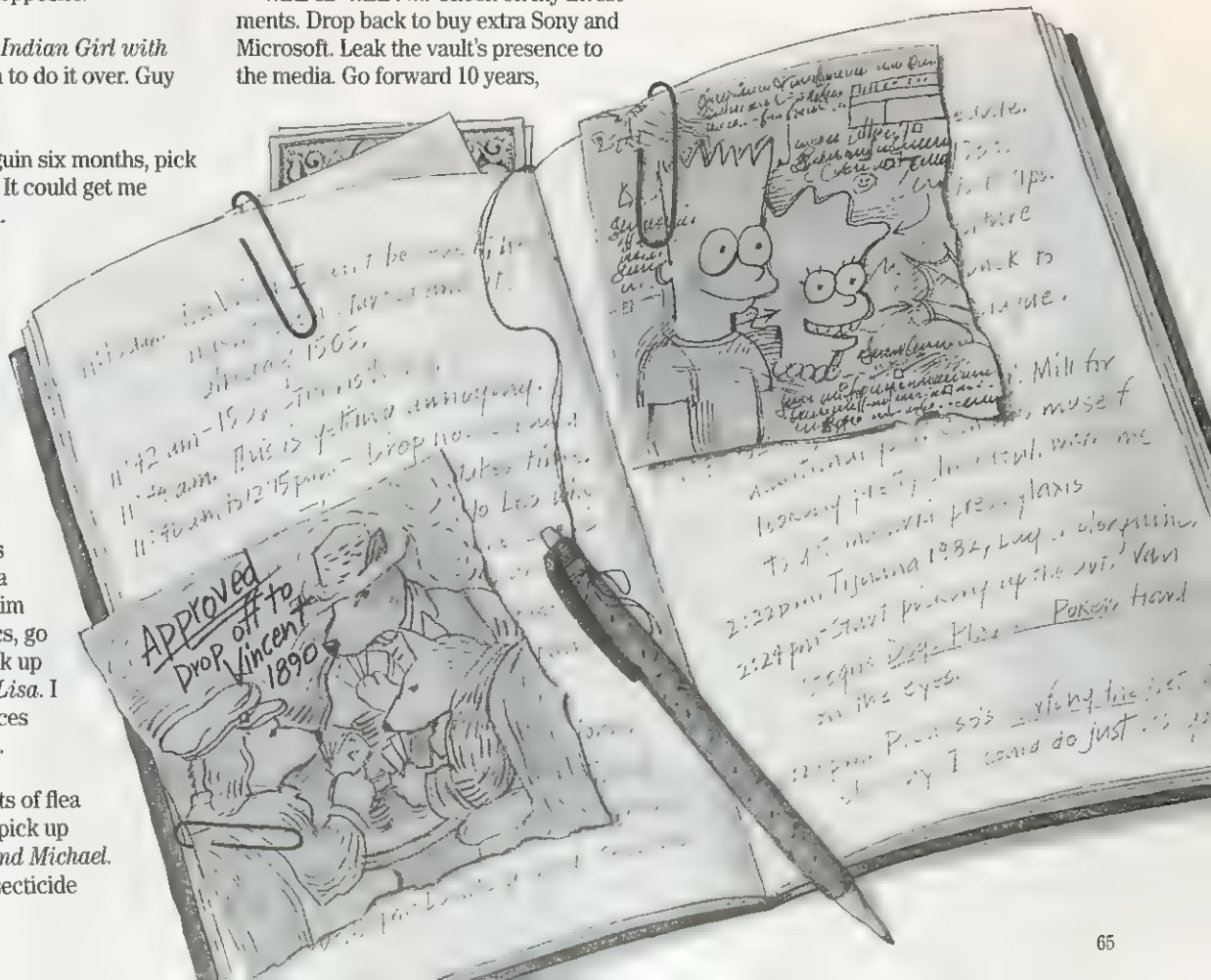
pick up an art history text. Read it with a 6-pack on a quiet beach in the prehellenic Mediterranean. Just as I thought! The content and quality of the paintings don't matter. Japanese businessmen buy Van Gogh's *Dogs Playing Poker* for 100 million dollars.

4:52 PM: Take my beer cans back to Olduvai Gorge. I like anthropologists about as much as I like art critics.

5:00 PM: Return the keys to Dave, and show him the cool picture of Pookie. He's watching *Saturday Night Live* reruns. Send out for pizza. My great-grandkid delivers it. □

BY S.N. DYER

Illustration By Annie Lunsford



FOUR FATHI

IN SEEKING OUT BRAVE NEW WORLDS, ALL THEY FOUND WERE THE SAME OLD PREJUDICES

PHIL CARMICHAEL WAS PLAYING KELLY POOL AGAINST THREE of his deputies and Bennett, the Dean of Genetics, when his secretary (a subroutine of the city computer), speaking through his wristcom, told him about the message from offworld. He swore mildly — his duties as a censor occupied more of his time than intervening in domestic disputes — before potting the three, putting himself out of the game. “Duty calls,” he apologized to the other players, and opened the mike on his wristcom. “Where’s the signal from?”

“The source identifies itself as the spaceship Altair.”

“A ship?” Carmichael had reached his office — only five paces from the pool table — by now.

“What’s the message?”

“Greetings to the people of the Free State of Ivory. This is the spaceship Altair, requesting clearance to land a shuttle. Estimated time of arrival one hundred and seventy five Terran hours. Have wonderful news.”

DINING ERS



BY STEPHEN DEDMAN

Illustration by Chris Moore

"One..." Carmichael lowered his bear-like bulk into a chair hurriedly. "That's less than three days."

"Two point eight nine," nipped the computer.

"And there's been no previous contact with this ship?"

"No."

Carmichael shook his head. "That's bull. No sign of it at all?"

"No."

"Do you have a fix on it?"

"Yes," replied the computer. "Two point oh four billion miles distant, a little over three light-hours." A holo appeared above Carmichael's cloned oak desk, showing the ship's position relative to the planets orbiting 70 Ophiuchi A. Carmichael, no astronomer, stared at it for a moment and did the math on his wristcom. A journey of three light-hours taking nearly three days, that was less than five percent of the speed of light... but they wanted to land a shuttle, so they'd have to be decelerating.

"Hold on a second," he said, rubbing his chin. "Do you have any reading on how fast this ship's moving now? Or how big it is?"

There was a moment's silence. "Not at present. I have summoned the Dean of Astronomy."

"I don't like this," Carmichael growled. "A ship shouldn't just be able to sneak into a system like that with no warning. Could it be a probe some joker's sent up from here?" He looked at the clock hanging next to the picture of his wife, to see if it was April 1st on Earth. It wasn't.

"Insufficient data."

If you mean you don't know, say so, he thought. "What's the maximum size it could be and not give you a clear reading?" he asked, wondering whether it was worth the risk of disturbing the mayor for what might still prove to be a hoax. He rather liked his job, and knew that he was unlikely to be re-elected without Burgess' endorsement.

"The object is clearly less than two miles in diameter with a mass of no more than ten trillion tons."

So, maybe a fifth the size of the *Forrest*, or maybe much smaller. It could still be a starship, he thought; maybe one with a more efficient drive, or just a smaller crew. Of course, a probe could be as small as two feet in diameter and weigh less than ten pounds. "Do we have any record of a starship named the *Altair*?"

"No."

"Nothing of that name being built before we left? No other radio transmissions?"

"No."

"Where is van Neukirk?" he muttered. "At the observatory?"

"Yes."

"Call him, tell him I'm on my way."

AT THIS DISTANCE, THE PLANET WAS INVISIBLE AGAINST THE orange sun, but Natsuki picked up the radio signals within seconds of the wormhole closing behind them. "That answers that question," he said. "It's inhabited?" asked Paratene.

"I think so. I'm getting music, voices in Amerish... doesn't sound like a probot. It's coming from near the edge of the ecosphere, which fits; I can't be sure until we're closer, but it's almost certainly the second planet, the one *Pathfinder* reported."

Paratene nodded. "What do we know about it?"

"One point oh two gravities, atmosphere seventy-two percent nitrogen, nineteen percent oxygen, five percent carbon dioxide, two percent argon," said Melendez, the planetologist. "Consistent with aquatic life. Surface water sixty-eight percent. The probots didn't find any life on land except for plant formations on the coastal plains, and all we really know about those is the color; blue-

green shading to indigo the further you go from the equator. One moon, about four hundred clicks diameter. Axial tilt is about thirty-three degrees, so seasonal effects shouldn't be too bad, and the probots didn't pick up any major windstorms; the tropics, at least, should be habitable."

"And the settlers?"

"One ship," said Toure. "The *Forrest*. Left Earth thirty years ago, so they would have been here five, six years at most."

Paratene nodded again, as her headware did the math. Twenty-four years trip time as measured on Earth, seventeen point one as measured on board, but still a hell of a long time to spend on a colony ship, even with eighty to ninety percent in coldsleep at any one time. "Population?"

"4320. It was built for five thousand." Toure shrugged. "The record suggests they left before any more decided to opt out."

"What do you know about them?"

Toure stared into the images conjured up by her headware memory. Paratene and Melendez were more than a century her junior, even if you combined their ages; they'd never been to Earth, and she wasn't sure how much of its history they'd been taught. How to explain white supremacists to people who'd only heard of the Ku Klux Klan in a Sherlock Holmes story, or the National Front to people who had no experience of nations? "They're genetic purists of a sort you wouldn't be familiar with," she said. "They believe that the genes for certain physical characteristics — pigmentation, mostly — were linked to those for intelligence and some behavioral traits. It's been a common delusion on Earth —" She shrugged, her expression wry. "And it probably still is, but only a minority of the believers became militant enough to form groups and arm themselves against what they saw as a menace. Most of the groups were disarmed — some slowly, some suddenly and with force — and many of them merged until the names became meaningless."

"A few thousand of those militants built and manned the *Forrest*; their intention was to create a world for pale-skinned people of north-western European ancestry. It's an old idea — it was called segregation, apartheid, or *lebensraum*, depending on where you were from — and often a poisonous one, though it's had most of its teeth pulled over the past few centuries." One of the greatest blows to white supremacists had been the cloning of *Homo neandertalensis* and pleistocene *Homo sapiens* from fossil DNA, in the early 22nd century; the Neandertals had proven to be fair-complexioned and blue-eyed, with hair shading from platinum to reddish blond (with a tendency to early male-pattern baldness), while the Cro-Magnons were olive-skinned with dark eyes and curly hair. "But you know how difficult it was to find people with the necessary skills who were willing to leave Earth without any hope of ever returning. Most migrants were fanatics of one stripe or another." This was greeted with a stony silence; Toure was, after all, talking about Melendez's parents and Paratene's grandparents. Athene and Tvashtri had been settled by curious scientists and adventurers, but the last three space arks sent to more distant worlds had been populated by lesbian separatists, the solar system's last communists, and finally white supremacists. None of these groups had been content with small, enclosed communities on the planets or asteroids of the solar system; all were looking for somewhere completely isolated from whoever they saw as their oppressors or enemies. Toure wondered idly who would have been given the next world if wormhole navigation hadn't been discovered.

"Will it be safe to land?"

Toure shrugged. "Ask me after we've spoken to them. We don't need the planet; there's always the option of building a waystation on one of the larger moons in the system. The big gas giant has one with nearly half a gravity, far enough away for radiation not to be a prob-

lem. The Martians would be happier there, anyway."

"I know," said Paratene.

"And they *chose* to isolate themselves from Earth," said Natsuki. "Do they have weapons, Rahal?"

Toure looked through the data, and nodded. "They had mammoth embryos in their gene bank, and took cyberfac specs for sidearms powerful enough to kill mammoth, as well as scatterguns for hunting and tasers for police work. And some of the groups had a tradition of weapons training, even for their children. How *many* guns they have, I guess we'll have to wait to find out."

PETER VAN NEUKIRK, THE DEAN OF ASTRONOMY, HAD A JOB even cushier than Carmichael's, though he'd been busy enough on the voyage and had spent almost no time in coldsleep en route. At seventy-six Terran years, he was the second oldest man on the planet, and had been thinking of retiring before he was called on to teach high school. He listened to the message from the *Altair* nervously, privately agreeing with Carmichael; it *should* have been impossible for a starship to enter the system without him detecting it, and he was worried that he might have screwed up royally. "Whatever it is, it's on the night side," he explained. "We won't be able to determine its size until after sunset; it's just lucky we have a comsat there."

"Do you think it's a hoax? Some clown sending up a probe with a recording or a simple computer —"

van Neukirk shook his head, as the instrument readouts reflected on his shiny scalp. "Not without either of us knowing about it. Besides, everybody here's either too old or too young for that sort of practical joke. Give it another, uh, ten years," he predicted gloomily.

"So what do you think it is? They sent another ship to settle the other side of the planet, or something?"

"They shouldn't have done, not without clearing it with us... but..."

"What?"

"Maybe they thought there weren't enough of us to survive. Remember when somebody, uh, destroyed all the human embryos in the gene bank?"

"I'm not likely to forget it," said Carmichael, drily. It was the only serious unsolved crime they'd had since leaving Earth — the destruction of ten thousand human fetuses, frozen at a week old ready for implantation into host mothers or the *Forrest's* artificial wombs. Few people were happy with the official explanation that the security guard on duty at the time, who had suicided a few days later, had been responsible. Both of Carmichael's predecessors had tried to unravel the crime, and he suspected that their failure had something to do with their failure to be re-elected.

van Neukirk apologized. "Of course not. But maybe this is an unmanned ship loaded with replacement embryos. It wouldn't need a crew, just somewhere to drop the cargo..."

"Wouldn't somebody have told us? Building a starship just for stork duty wouldn't be cheap, and it's not like we still have a lot of supporters back on Earth."

The astronomer nodded. "You're probably right. But if you're scared that this is, uh, an invasion force, I think you can stop worrying. Nobody would bother."

"You're sure?"

"Yeah. They would've just sent an AM-bomb to take out the ship while we were decelerating. *Much* cheaper. Of course, that thing *could* still be some sort of bomb, but the probability's not more than... uh, say one in six." He grinned.

DESPITE VAN NEUKIRK'S WARNING THAT THE SHIP would be invisible to a naked eye, nearly half of New Virginia's seven thousand people were standing out in the snow at sunset, staring up at the sky. Jessie Randolph, arguably the most influential woman on the planet now that her children were old enough to be left in a creche, was among the crowd with a camera and microphone perched on her

shoulder like a parrot, while her male colleagues waited in the observatory or outside the mayor's office. On Earth, Jessie's blonde good looks had gotten her a job as a weather girl on an Idaho flatscreen channel, which made her Ivory's second-best qualified journalist. Perhaps more importantly, she was the wife of chief medtech John Randolph, the descendent of Grand Dragons and Imperial Wizards, and the daughter of Harry Poulsen, the settlement's Chief Justice, official historian, former Attorney-General, and oldest male citizen.

"Why do you think they've come here?"

Jessie knew Aline Bennett's voice too well to need to turn around, though the settlement's only female lawyer wasn't a particularly close friend. "I don't know. van Neukirk says it's too small for a colony ship; we don't even know if it's manned at all."

"A new *Pathfinder* or something?" asked Aline, leaning against a wall. She was seven months pregnant, and her feet hurt like hell. "Then why would it need clearance to land a shuttle?"

"Maybe it has cargo for us, something we can't manufacture ourselves."

The lawyer nodded. "van Neukirk suggested embryos, to replace the ones destroyed by the saboteur."

"What does Ben think?"

"He said something about Greeks bearing gifts; how're we supposed to be sure their genes are all white? A sort of one-two punch; the saboteur kills the babies we brought with us, an accomplice on Earth sends us enough genetic trash to form a majority. Before you know it, we have a load of mongrels running around, after all the precautions we took." She shook her head. "But I guess we'll have to wait and see."

Jessie suppressed a shudder. "No-one would do that. They must know we're not dumb enough to fall for a trick that obvious. It'd only take us a few weeks to scan all of the fetuses..." She shook her head. "If they wanted to destroy us, it would've been a lot cheaper and easier to have put a bomb in the ship. Chances are that nobody would have found the wreckage, even if they'd looked; the pieces would've gone in a million different directions and travelled forever."

Aline shrugged. "Maybe they were just too damn soft to kill us outright. Anyway, it's only a theory. Bet you wish you were at the observatory."

"Yes."

Another shrug. "I know how you feel. Every time I go into court, I wonder if I'm doing my client more harm than good just by being a woman."

"Any conclusions?"

She smiled sourly. "Only that a lot depends on the jury, which you can't predict, and sometimes on whether my client is in the right or not."

"Why do you stick with it?"

"I don't know. I'd take Phil up on his offer of a female deputy's position, but not while I'm pregnant; I don't want to waste my time stuck behind a desk. Besides, the judges aren't going to live forever, so there may be a vacancy on the bench for me someday. Any help you can give is appreciated, of course."

"Sorry," Jessie replied. "Dad and I have our differences, but I'm not going to kill him just to get you a promotion."

"That wasn't what I meant, and you know it."

"Sorry. Besides, if they make you a judge, it'll be more than twenty years before we have another female lawyer... unless there's one on that ship, of course."

VAN NEUKIRK STARED AT THE INSTRUMENTS, AND NODDED. "At a first estimate, it's a little more than half a mile long, maybe three hundred yards at its widest point. Moving at about thirteen thousand miles per second, and decelerating. Radiation consistent with a conventional anti-matter drive. I suppose it *could* be manned, but if it is, then either the crew is damn small or they like cramped quarters. The messages they've sent give the impression that it *is* manned, but I'll want to see some people in the flesh before I take that on faith." He man-

aged to keep the fury out of his voice; there was no explanation he could give for a ship that large entering the system undetected, and it looked as though he might have to retire even earlier than he'd expected. He hated farming almost as much as he hated the thought of being shut out from the observatory; the only consolation was that they wouldn't make him teach.

Burgess, the mayor, nodded sagely, then turned to Carmichael. "Any more word about the purpose of their visit?"

"A little. It seems that someone on Athene has invented a faster stardrive, fast enough for crews to make return trips between here and Earth — or any other inhabited system. This one ship has already travelled from Athene to Earth, to Tvashtri, and now here. They haven't said anything about the size of their crew, but they seem to be explorers rather than colonists."

"Why do they want to land?"

"I'm not sure. They haven't answered many of our questions; turnaround time for a message is still nearly six hours." He glanced at van Neukirk, who seemed to be absorbed in his headware. "If I may make a suggestion, your honor..."

van Neukirk suddenly sat bolt upright, almost falling from his stool. "A faster stardrive!"

"What?"

"How much faster could it be? We were travelling at point seven c for most of the voyage — seventy percent of lightspeed," he explained, for Burgess' benefit. "At most, it could be about forty percent faster — ninety-nine percent lightspeed. The trip here would still take more than seventeen standard years objectively, about three months shipboard time. Now, that may make return trips between systems practical, though I'd doubt it; a round trip from Earth to here is still nearly thirty-five years, and Earth can change a lot in that sort of time. *But* —" He drew a deep breath. "Athene to Earth to here is twenty one point four standard years, even at that speed, so the ship would have had to be built at least that long ago. Right?"

The others — Carmichael, Burgess, Poulsen, Bennett, and Keys — looked at him blankly. "So?" asked Burgess.

"Radio," said Carmichael, after a moment's thought. "It's still slower than radio, so news would get here first... but it didn't." He blinked. "You think it can travel faster than light? I thought that was impossible."

"It was, and maybe it still is, but, uh, it *would* explain why we didn't detect it until it was only a few days away."

"So would some new sort of stealth technology," suggested Keys, the Attorney General. "Which do you think is more likely?"

Burgess glanced at Carmichael, who shrugged. "What do you suggest?" the mayor asked.

"We still have a few days to learn their intentions before needing to make a decision," said Carmichael. "At present, I'm in favor of letting them land a safe distance from town and meeting them there... but ask me again tomorrow, and I may say something completely different."

"Piet?"

"He's right. I know I have plenty of questions I want to ask." He chuckled. "I gather the same is true of the rest of you? I say we write any questions down, you and Phil can assign them a priority, and we just keep talking until the time-lag gets down to, uh, a more manageable level. Unless anyone else has any better ideas?"

CHOOSING A LANDING PARTY TOOK PARATENE AND TOURE two standard days. After listening in to communications with the settlement on Ivory, Toure insisted on restricting the choice to fair-skinned males of western European ancestry who were raised in one gravity. "It's just a hunch, but I don't think they recognize women as being in authority either," she said. "Everyone we've spoken to is male; I haven't seen any evidence that there are any women *alive* down there."

"The records say there were 2109 women on the *Forrest*," replied Paratene.

"That was decades ago! The men may not have bothered waking them out of coldsleep; they might just be raising embryos in the arti-

ficial wombs."

"They only have ten of those, and I thought racists tended to homophobia."

"They took plenty of sheep embryos, too."

Paratene laughed, despite herself. "You really dislike these people, don't you?"

Toure looked at her, wondering if the concept of hatred had made the journey to Athene. "I dislike the type, and yes, I admit that's a prejudice. I have a problem with societies that will class me as inferior on first sight — and I grew up in one, so I know of what I speak. But I still think we'd be better off with a man leading the party, at least."

"How large a party do we need?"

"I'd recommend two — a pilot for the shuttle, and someone who can serve as a diplomat. You shouldn't need more than two, and I'd advise against taking fewer."

Paratene nodded. "What about Jean Bailly and David Everett?"

"Everett's a good choice," replied Toure, after a glance at his file. The medtech and psychist-apprentice was younger than she would have liked, only twenty-seven standard years old, but he stood nearly two meters tall, with the handsome looks and athletic build common on Athene. His hair was a rusty brown, his eyes blue-green, and he tended to freckle. "But the Ivorians probably don't like hermaphrodites, either. Do you have another pilot?"

"Alyssa Catania or Madelon Schaefer."

Toure shrugged. "Either would be OK; Everett can choose, if you prefer. He's going to have to *look* as though he's in charge, at least."

"OK. How long do you need for the briefing?"

"As long as we have. The more history I can teach them, the better they'll understand the Ivorians, and the less likely they are to make any dangerous mistakes."

DESPIITE KEYS'S PROTESTS ABOUT LEAVING THE TOWN inadequately defended against a sneak attack, the welcome party — Burgess, Carmichael, Bennett, van Neukirk, and four deputies — left New Virginia six standard days later, while Krueger, the settlement's planetologist, headed back from his surveying expedition on Ivory's far side. Krueger had chosen a landing site on a floodplain where tough terraforming lichens had begun the work of turning rock to soil, and was far enough from town to satisfy Carmichael and Keys.

van Neukirk stared down at the landscape as the tilter flew over it, and shook his head as though he still wasn't used to seeing planets this close up. Much of Ivory was too cold to be habitable, especially during the thirty-hour winter nights; New Virginia straddled the equator, and while the weather there was pleasant enough by his standards, he doubted that they would ever build any towns outside the tropics. He wondered how much population the planet could support. The terraforming plants were doing their work on schedule; there was already enough grass around the town for their sheep and cattle, and in a few years, there would be a habitat large enough for the animals now kept in the zoo — deer, antelope, mammoth, short-faced bears, lions, wolves, passenger pigeons. Only the human population growth would be slower than planned, despite the best efforts of the settlement's men to keep their wives pregnant for the rest of their safe child-bearing years.

"What's wrong?"

van Neukirk looked around, to see Carmichael sitting on his left. "Wrong?"

"You looked worried."

The astronomer shrugged. "I have this strange feeling of *deja vu*. My father hated cities, kept moving as far from them as his work allowed — that's probably how I became an astronomer; less light pollution, easier to see the stars. But the cities kept expanding and catching up with us, no matter how often we moved." He stared at the native vegetation on the shore, a vast mat of vascular plants similar to terrestrial *Cooksonia*, but more blue than green. "We all chose to isolate ourselves from, uh, the bulk of humanity, and now it's

caught up with us."

"They say they'll build their waystation on Terre'Blanche if we don't want them building one here. Not that I understand why they need waystations..."

"They travel by wormhole," said the astronomer, "and the wormholes only form at certain times — don't ask me to explain that, I can't, yet. Most of their travel time is actually spent travelling from wormhole to planet, or just waiting around for the wormhole to form, so the ships aren't built for, uh, long-term occupancy. They've even said there'll be less radio noise to worry about — mail will be so much faster than radio, and cheaper — which will make both of our jobs easier. But I'm wondering how, uh, many of us are going to choose to remain isolated. It won't be difficult to stop people we don't want coming here, but how do we stop the ones we *do* want from leaving? And, uh, do we have that right?"

"You think people will want to leave?" asked Burgess. His Australian accent, normally subdued, was strong, a sure sign of anger. van Neukirk glanced at him, then shrugged again. "Some will. We were all prepared to, uh, tough it out when we thought we had no choice, but now that we *do* have a choice..."

"So we don't give them a choice," snapped Burgess.

"I don't know," said Carmichael. "It might be better to have a safety valve. The shortage of single women over the age of five is already causing problems; this might help us do something about the ratio."

"That wasn't my fault," grumped Burgess. "I wanted to restrict emigration to couples, but if we hadn't included single males, we would've gone under the four thousand and they would've taken the planet away from us."

van Neukirk looked at him without much sympathy; he was single himself, being twice divorced, and had been glad to see an exception made. He'd never been particularly political, but he'd been passed over for earlier crews and there hadn't been any competition for the astronomer's position on the *Forrest*, where his qualifications and his Boer ancestry had been considered more important than his social skills. "We're not blaming you," he said. "I'm just wondering what'll happen if enough, uh, people leave that Earth decides that we're no longer viable. Are they going to insist on immigration, maybe giving part of the planet to, uh..."

"Non-whites," muttered Burgess. He reached for the radio. "Jesus, if I could get my hands on whoever flushed those... Ben? We need your opinion on something."

DAVID EVERETT MANAGED TO LOOK AT THE PARTY WHO stepped out of the filters without cracking a smile. Five men in khaki, all with huge pistols on their hips; two in high-collared black suits, which might have been formal wear or military uniforms without insignia; and one in a long black robe and a heavy gold chain. Toure, watching through his headware communicator, tentatively identified them as the mayor, security staff, and two advisers, probably scientists. Everett suggested to Madelon that she remain on the shuttle, and walked down the ramp, hands obviously empty. "Welcome to Ivory," said Burgess, flatly.

"Thank you." He resisted the temptation to say either 'We come in peace' or 'Take me to your leader', settling for, "It's good to be on a planet again. I'm David Everett, Executive Officer of the *Altair*." It sounded good, for a totally meaningless title.

"Stick close to them," Toure whispered into his com. "Those are rocket pistols, probably with explosive heads; they're not lethal at point-blank range, and they won't have time to home in on you."

Burgess introduced his team; Everett shook hands with all of them,

wondering if he was supposed to be giving the countersign to a secret handshake. "Forgive the informality," said Burgess. "We weren't expecting any visitors."

"That's fine," said Everett, smiling. "This isn't an official visit; I'm just here to make sure everyone's okay, and see if there's anything you need."

"Did you come alone?"

Everett hesitated. "Tell them the truth," urged Paratene. "We may learn a lot more if Madelon can speak to the women."

"No," he said. "My pilot's in the shuttle. She can fly back to the ship if you prefer, but I'd rather she came with me."

Burgess glanced at van Neukirk and Carmichael, both of whom looked up at the sky. Heavy clouds were gathering above them. "There's room in the tilters for another two," said Burgess, trying not to growl as a drop of rain splattered on his balding pate. "I guess it's up to you."

- II -

MADOLON looked at the young mammoth in their pen, which seemed far too flimsy to hold adults. "We won't be releasing them until there are enough trees to feed them all," said Jessie, "and apart from the wolves, we won't be breeding any of the carnivores until then, either. The ecologists on Earth made us take some sabertooth embryos as well, said we'd need them to keep the mammoth numbers in control, but there's no plans to raise them, unless we decide to keep a pair for the zoo. If we need to control the mammoth population, we have guns for the job. Besides, sabertooths are too dumb to learn not to attack humans, and as far as we're concerned, that's too dumb to live. Biodiversity is one thing, but do we have to preserve obvious mistakes?" She shrugged. "Of course, the wombs aren't being used for much, anyway."

Madelon looked at the young animals, and nodded. "David's asked our historian, Dr Toure, to look back at your records to see if she can help your sheriff find out who was responsible for that."

"What can she do?"

"I'm not sure; possibly find something that your people missed at the time."

Jessie shook her head. "People've been trying to solve that one for nearly ten years now, we publish a new theory every year or two, and the best hypothesis is still that Wallace, the security guard who committed suicide, was responsible."

"Toure doesn't think it was one person; she says the job's just too big."

"Everyone thinks that; I suspect it's just that the consequences are too big for the blame to fit on one person. Like political assassinations; most people are unhappy with the idea that one man with a gun can bring down a man with that much power. They'd rather believe in conspiracies. How much longer will you and David be staying?"

"The wormhole won't form for another five standard days, so we'll be gone by then, but David's still negotiating with your council."

"What about? I thought we'd all agreed that you weren't going to be building a base here?"

Madelon nodded. Paratene had agreed with Burgess that all of the Ivorians had chosen to isolate themselves from any other human worlds, and that creating a waystation there in case anyone decided to leave was contrary to the will of the community, though Toure had tried to insist on a vote. "We've suggested a moratorium of ten standard years. Shortly after that, however, some of your children here will be legally adults under Earth law, and the political climate may have changed." She turned up the heating circuit in her jacket; even

spring days on Ivory were much colder than she was accustomed to, and after seventy hours planetside, she was longing to return to the *Altair*. "I suppose we'll have to wait and see."

"A lot of people won't like it," warned Jessie.

"Maybe. I suppose that depends on how they're told about it, doesn't it?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, forgive me if I've misunderstood the way things are done on this world," said Madelon, "but all of the political jobs seem to be held by men — unless you regard yours as a political job, of course."

Jessie silently walked to the next enclosure, which contained a short-faced bear who looked uncannily like Bert Lahr's Cowardly Lion. "What makes you think that men and women here are going to disagree on this issue? Or any other big issue, for that matter?"

Madelon blinked. "Well, on other worlds..."

"This isn't 'other worlds,'" replied Jessie, sharply. "We all agreed on our reason for coming here, and we'll raise our children as they should they be raised, do you understand?" Numbly, Madelon nodded. "I don't know if you think our men can't or don't care about their children, but if you do, you're wrong. They're our bloodline, our future; that's why we gave them a world of their own. You can ask us again in ten years, or ten thousand, and that will still be our answer. What're you going to do then?"

"THIS IS RIDICULOUS," SAID TOURE, AS SHE READ through the sheriff's files on the sabotage, which Everett had uploaded from the settlement's computer. "If these people *want* this crime solved, why didn't they keep any records of their interviews?"

"I asked Carmichael that," said Everett, laying on his murderously uncomfortable bed, which had been hastily constructed from children's cots. "He says that since everyone who was interviewed was cleared, there was no point in keeping the records. At least, that's what his predecessor told him."

"That's bull. If their records are correct, there were only 481 people out of coldsleep. Now, I know that's a lot of interviews for one sheriff and three deputies, but Hell, this was the only serious crime they had to deal with in the entire voyage."

"The sheriff is elected," Everett replied. "I don't know what he needs in the way of qualifications. And he appoints his own deputies."

"Then whoever was sheriff at the time — Fleischer? — must either have been an absolute incompetent, or have had reasons of his own for a cover-up. Even *elected* officials aren't usually that stupid. Look, under their law, abortion is murder, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"So we're talking *ten thousand murders*, supposedly performed by one person overnight — not that I believe that part either — and fewer than 500 suspects. That may sound like a large number, but he knows that at least *one* of them has to be guilty. And it's easy for a computer to scan someone and tell when they're probably lying; listening for changes to heartbeat and respiration, tremors in the voice, watching eye movement, infra-red to detect blush response..."

"His notes say he interviewed everyone who wasn't on duty, and had the computer collate the alibis. Those whose alibis didn't pan out, he interviewed again. No-one confessed, and he didn't find any forensic evidence, so..."

"So he gave up, and his successor — Earl? — not only adds nothing to what little is known, but scrubs the interview records of everyone he thinks must have been innocent. Have you spoken to these idiots?"

"Fleischer is dead — heart attack, about a month after the *Forrest*

landed. Earl, who was one of his deputies, ran for re-election, was beaten by Carmichael, and is with a survey team mapping farside." Everett shrugged. "We still have the duty roster, if that helps. It clears another twenty people, including the chief medtech."

Toure sighed. "Let's hope he doesn't erase more than he finds this time around. Have you looked around the gene bank?"

"Yes."

"You're a medtech; you must have some training with that sort of equipment." Everett nodded. "How long do you think it'd take one person to circumvent the security system, remove ten thousand embryos from the freezer, and — what was done with them?"

"There's a matter recycler in the lab. According to the computer, and Fleischer's records, it must have been running hot; it disposed of 230 pounds — that's about 105 kilos — of matter in less than an hour. It would have been much easier to let the embryos thaw, but that would have destroyed the animals too."

"105 kilos? That's two adult corpses worth! Didn't that trigger any alarms?"

"The security guard wasn't at his post."

Toure whistled. "So that's why the dog didn't bark."

"What?"

"Sherlock Holmes. Never mind. Where was he?"

"He wouldn't say. Fleischer's notes say he suspected he was with a woman, but he wouldn't name her. As there weren't any single women out of coldsleep at the time, that meant adultery, which is considered about as serious as dereliction of duty — worse, even; they might accept mitigating circumstances for deserting a post, but adultery tends to be fatal for both parties. Lynch law. The guard, Wallace, hanged himself in his cell — it seems Fleischer forgot to confiscate his belt — apparently to protect the woman."

"Uh-huh. That strikes me as suspicious, too; even if his getting laid were a regular occurrence, it's a pretty remarkable coincidence that this was done while no-one was looking after security for that section. What other security was there on the gene bank?"

"Locks, alarms, and scanners, but the individual got past them all, which meant they probably had to either work for security or the gene lab... or had access to their security codes, anyway."

"Cameras?"

"They fooled the infra-red by increasing the heat in the room to forty degrees. The holo camera did a scan of the room every fifteen minutes, but someone unplugged it between 1418 and 1433 hours ship-time and plugged it in between 1503 and 1518, while the guard..."

"Was having his brains screwed out, yeah. Could one person do all that in forty-five minutes?"

Everett thought about it. "I don't think *I* could, even if I knew exactly what I was doing with the security system. I think it'd take two people. Three would be even faster."

"And a third or fourth to keep the guard occupied. Let me guess; all of the security and genetics lab staff had alibis, so Earl wiped the record of their interviews?"

"It looks that way."

"How much of this has Carmichael noticed? How bright is he?"

"I don't think he wants to criticize a former superior, but he seems genuinely pissed that all the interviews were erased. Most of the people here believe there's been some sort of cover-up, even if it's only of the sheriffs' ineptitude after the fact."

"Which sounds — just a second." Toure looked up from the monitor; a window had appeared on the screen, showing Paratene outside her door. "Yes?"

"Can I come in? I have to talk to you about the treaty."

"Just a second." She turned her attention back to Everett. "Good work. I'll call you back. Okay, come in."

Paratene walked in. Unlike her own cabin, which was decorated with copies of Maori art and holos of a New Zealand her ancestors had known but which she'd never seen, Toure's showed nothing of her origin except for a holo of her family tree growing ivy-like from the desk. The floor and one wall were blank, and the ceiling and other walls showed the planet below and the surrounding starscape. Paratene sat down on the bed, the only item of furniture apart from the desk and chair, and looked at the image of the planet. "We've finished drafting the agreement with the Ivorians. Do you want to read it?"

"We", Toure knew, meant Paratene and the computer, the nearest they had to a lawyer on board. "Yes. Thanks."

"I'm sorry for not giving you more of a voice in the negotiations." Toure nodded stiffly. "You and Burgess would never have agreed, and if we'd stayed and waited for a vote... I doubt it would have made any real difference. Has anyone approached Everett or Schaefer, asking to be taken offworld?"

"No," replied Toure, sourly.

"I guess we're never going to agree either."

Toure raised an eyebrow. "Agree on what?"

"On this," Paratene shifted uncomfortably on the bed. "On the Ivorians and their children. Okay, we agree on their right to leave when they become adults, but you obviously don't believe the adults have the right to censor what their children read."

"When you put it that way, I'm surprised *you* can defend it."

Paratene shrugged. "I didn't want to quibble over wording. But look at it from the Ivorians point of view. All they want is to preserve their genes. What's wrong with that? Why do you think we're seeding the planets with species that are extinct on Earth? Mammoth, dodos, passenger pigeons, wolves, tigers, blue whales... How long was spent reconstructing enough Neandertal DNA to clone Neandertals? Why should we be so determined to stop them?"

"If it were just their genes," said Toure, slowly, "I'd agree with you. But they want to preserve a way of thinking, too, and that way of thinking is poisonous. At the core of it is more than their right to survive; they believe they have the god-given right to dominate humanity, and to exterminate what they can't subjugate, and their heroes are men who've killed for this right."

"Most societies have killers for heroes," Paratene reminded her, gently.

"Really? Who are the heroes of Athene? Or Tvashtri? Or Sappho? Or Mars?" Paratene opened her mouth to speak, but Toure hadn't finished. "Of course, if you mean most societies on *Earth*, you may be right. How many 'societies' are there on Athene? Do the physicists sit around and reminisce about how their ancestors nuked the geneticists? Is anyone ready to fight to the death for the superiority of the haiku over the sestina?"

"Rahal, this isn't a joke..."

"Have your cricket teams ever shot it out? Or fans of your soccer clubs ever beaten the living crap out of each other? Has a major riot ever broken out because of the accent of an actor chosen to play Macbeth? *That's* happened on Earth."

"Last millennium," said Paratene, waving her hand as though the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were merely a bad smell. "No, of course nothing like that's happened on Athene; even if one of them could get a gun, there aren't enough cricketers to play a match if anyone's injured."

"I gather they haven't passed the enthusiasm onto their children?"

"No; most of them get bored with it and stop playing when they hit adolescence..." She noticed the snile on Toure's face. "What?"

"You included?"

"Yes. So?"

"I know that at least some of your ancestors came from New Zealand. You don't feel you have to preserve cricket as one of the traditions of your nation?"

"Cricket's a tradition of the British Empire, which has been dead for centuries... I know, you're about to say the same for white supremacy, aren't you? I don't think it's all that good an analogy."

Toure shrugged. "Maybe not — as long as your cricketing society defends the right of people *not* to play cricket or to be bored

comatose watching the bloody game. I don't think the Ivorians are that benevolent. If there's anyone they hate more than non-whites, it's white nigger-lovers."

"Nigger?"

"Black. From 'negro'. Nigger-lovers are whites who associate with people like you and me. That's why I've agreed to the ten-year embargo; I don't think the planet will be safe for visitors until the current population are safely dead. Maybe the society could have remained stable without any outside influence, but I doubt it; these people need an underclass to feel superior to, and I have a sneaking suspicion that role will fall on the women. I just hope their children aren't past redemption."

"All new settlements tend to keep the women pregnant and sheltered for the first few years," said Paratene, heavily. "Do you want to separate all the children from their parents? That strikes me as violating the rights of the children *and* the parents. What rights do you think the Ivorians *are* entitled to?"

"No, I don't want to break up the families," snapped Toure. "That's not only a violation of rights, it's an obscenity. I will defend the human rights of every human on that planet. The *society*, however, has no rights, except those of the individuals who make it up."

"That's a bit extreme," said Paratene, cautiously, after thinking for a moment. "As you said, some of my ancestors were Maoris, and without the tribe..." Her voice trailed off.

"Yes, I know," said Toure. "You divided the world into your tribe and the *pakeha*, those not of your tribe. My 'tribe' was a small Muslim enclave in the south-west of Australia. They practiced female circumcision as part of their religious tradition."

"What's circumcision?"

"In men and hermaphrodites, removal of the foreskin; it's still performed in medical emergencies. In women, it's removal of part or all of the clitoris hood, sometimes the clitoris itself, sometimes the *labia minora* as well." She looked at Paratene, who had turned pale. "If a man had done that to a child, back when I was young, he would have been imprisoned as a monster, and probably beaten to death by his fellow inmates, whatever excuse he'd given... but because it was the practice of a *society*, the Australian government didn't dare interfere. Freedom of religion meant the freedom to mutilate children — as long as they're your own children, of course, and after all, it's not as though they were doing anything to the *boys*." She grimaced reassuringly. "Don't worry. I had a new body cloned for myself when I was twenty-seven — this is my third — and as far as I know, I'm the last survivor of that community and female circumcision hasn't been practiced in decades, even on Earth. But what if we'd given *them* their own planet?"

"DAMN, YOU'RE GOOD," MUTTERED CARMICHAEL, AS Everett potted the black.

Everett grinned. "It's the only sport we have room for on the ship, unless we want to do laps of the spa."

"Uh-huh. We had a stadium with a baseball diamond, a football field... everything except golf, which is no way for a grown man to spend his time anyhow." He racked the balls. "So, how much room you got on that ship of yours for passengers?"

"Why?" asked Everett, still grinning. "You're not thinking of leaving here, are you?"

"Hell, no," replied Carmichael, grinning back. "Just wondering if anybody else was."

"I can't tell you that," said Everett, instantly serious.

"Guess it doesn't matter. Just figured that after all the fine work you done on the sabotage, it'd be funny if the saboteur used your ship to escape on."

"Why would they do that?"

"What would happen to them if they did? Is killing babies a crime where you're from?"

Everett stood there, quietly chalking his cue. "In this case, it'd be treated as sabotage. It wouldn't attract the death penalty, which I

gather would be the punishment here?"

"At the least."

"It'd be a mess," said Everett, after a moment's thought. "The worm-hole drive is fast enough that extradition becomes possible; the question is whether anyone would return suspects here if they knew the probability existed that they'd be executed." He narrowly avoided saying 'lynched'. "You think the guilty parties are likely to try escaping?"

"I don't see why not. They obviously don't agree with our way of life — unless they want to stick around and do some more harm."

"Or are already dead."

"Yeah, that's possible. I'd still like to know for sure, though."

"How many deaths have there been since the incident?"

"114. Mostly natural causes or accidents; only twelve suicides and seven murder or manslaughter, all solved. It's your break."

"What? Oh, thanks." A few seconds later, staring at the constellation of balls on the table, he asked, "Have you told anyone else about the investigation?"

"Only Keys and Burgess; I don't know who they've told. Why?"

"Not important. You were in coldsleep when the incident took place, weren't you?"

"Yep. Why?"

"Just wondering about Wallace. Fleischer suspected that he'd been with a woman, but do you know if he searched Wallace's bunk for hairs or other forensic evidence? I know the people who actually destroyed the embryos wore gloves, but maybe Wallace's woman..."

"If there *was* such a woman," said Carmichael. "I knew Wallace pretty well; he liked women, especially blondes, but I'll bet the only ones he had were in his imagination."

"Maybe, but did Fleischer check?"

A pause. "It's not in his files?"

"No, not unless he left a back-up somewhere."

Carmichael sighed. "If he found anything, anything that might have been a clue, he would have checked it on the genescanner in the lab. The computer should still have a record of that — unless it was erased, which he couldn't have done without the A-G's clearance. I think you're wasting your time — even if Fleischer had found a woman's hair or whatever in Wallace's bunk, it wouldn't necessarily mean she'd been there that night, or with him — but if you like, I can ask Keys to let you examine the records."

"Thanks."

"NOTHING," MUTTERED EVERETT. "EITHER NO material was ever scanned, or the records have been erased. Damn."

Carmichael shrugged. "I said I thought you were wasting your time — what're you doing now?"

"Just a hunch," he said. The sheriff looked around the lab, worried; they had clearance to be in the gene bank, it was kept under minimal security now that the embryos were already gone, but the cavernous room made him extremely nervous. It was, in its way, Ivory's answer to Ford's Theatre, Dealey Plaza, or Mitre Square.

"What sort of hunch? All you've got there are the records of scans already performed."

"I know — that's interesting... Three scans performed four days before the crime was committed, and not erased. Human, too."

"How can you tell?" asked Carmichael, peering at the screen.

"It's my job," replied Everett. "Just a second." He stared at a row of letters and figures, glad that the *Altair's* computer was recording everything he saw and heard. He checked the data on the screen against the memories in his headware, and whistled softly.

"What?"

"Can you call the ship, ask them to wake Dr. Toure? I think I've found the answer."

"You know who killed the babies?"

"No, but I think I know *why*. But I need her to check this out against the ship's computer; I'd hate to be wrong about this."

Carmichael shrugged. "Okay. I'll meet you in my office when you're finished."

TOURE BREATHED OUT SLOWLY. "DAVID, YOU'RE A GENIUS." Everett blushed. "Just dumb luck, more likely. I was looking for the wrong thing in the wrong place, and I saw this, and —"

"And you recognized it for what it was, and what it meant. Don't underestimate yourself. This changes everything."

"It doesn't tell us who destroyed the embryos... *if* they destroyed them. Maybe they hid a few amid the cattle or mammoth, as insurance. Embryos look pretty much alike, whatever species they're from, until they're much more advanced than these were."

Toure considered this. "The old purloined letter schtick, eh? Problem with that is that all of those embryos were meant to be spawned by now, and according to Schaefer's report, more than a third have been. Now, I'm not a medtech, but wouldn't it be easier to hide them in the coldsleep chambers?"

"I hadn't thought of that... can you dock with the *Forrest*, send someone in to look?"

"I'll have to clear it with the Ivorians, but I think so. Most of the crew are pretty bored."

"Okay. I want to talk to a few people, even if it is officially night here." He and Madelon had pretty much adjusted to the cold nights and the orange sunlight, but they were still finding it difficult to adjust to the sixty-hour Ivorian day with its twenty-hour sleep cycles. "Carmichael's been a great help, but I need to talk to Bennett, the geneticist. Pity his predecessor's dead."

"Unfortunate, that, both the sheriff who lead the investigation *and* the geneticist having died."

"It was more than nine standard years ago," said Everett, locking the door to the gene bank behind him and jogging across the courtyard, "and neither of them were young; people do die naturally, you know. Besides, Thompson, the old dean, was in coldsleep at the time, so he's not exactly a suspect. Not for destroying the embryos, anyway. I guess he'd have to have been involved in —" He stopped, seeing a flash in the darkness ahead. Toure had just enough time to register what it meant, too little to yell, not that it would have done any good. Everett threw himself to the ground, but the rocket had already locked on to his body heat and the shape-charge warhead, designed to kill mammoth, hit him in the back just below the ribs. The explosion tore him in half and Toure wept while she stared through his eyes, still open, at the cold soil of Ivory.

- III -

CARMICHAEL

turned the top half of the body over to look down into the face. He looked to be genuinely upset — unlike the deputies, who seemed confused, and Burgess and Keys, whose faces were rigid and cold. Madelon knelt by Everett's head, barely hearing Toure's voice as it was conducted through bone from her headware. "Ask how many of these guns they have," Toure insisted.

"How many of these guns do you have?" Madelon asked, a moment later.

Carmichael looked around at his deputies, who were armed only with their tasers and stunclubs. "Most of the farms have one, and there's, I don't know, a hundred or so in town. We don't register them; Hell, no-one's ever been killed by one before."

One of the deputies — Josh Wilkins — nodded. "Most folks prefer shotguns." Carmichael glared at him.

"Do you have any forensic tests that'll tell you who did this?" asked Madelon. "Serial numbers on the rocket? Rifling marks? A test to see which guns have been used, or who's handled one?"

"The last two, yes," said Carmichael. "Serial numbers, no; no rifling marks either, unless the gun's faulty. But people do use 'em for target practice —"

"It'll narrow it down," said Madelon.

"You're not giving orders here," said Keys, looking up to see more people approaching — John and Jessie Randolph, Harry Poulsen, Adam Bennett, and Pieter van Neukirk.

"She knows that," said Carmichael, gently. "And I think it's a perfectly reasonable request. Josh, see who's been signed up for target practice in the last thirty hours; those are the first people I'll want to see."

"Does that include deputies?"

"Yep. May as well get them out of the way first. John, you want to pronounce Mr. Everett dead?"

The medtech nodded, his expression unreadable in the half-darkness. Madelon remained kneeling on the ground as Carmichael sketched a chalk outline around the corpse before the deputies and medtech-apprentices carried it away. A few minutes later, Carmichael sent the others away, and put an arm around her shoulders. She shrugged it off angrily.

"Sorry," he said. "Look, Miss Schaefer, I'm going to do all I can to get to the bottom of this, but I'm going to need your help." She nodded. "Even so, I can't promise to solve anything before your ship leaves. You're in touch with your captain, aren't you?" Another nod. "And Dr. Toure? Good. Now, I'm guessing that Dave was murdered to stop him getting any closer to the people responsible for the killing of the babies in the gene lab. Do you agree?"

Madelon was silent for a moment. "Dr. Toure says it's possible."

"Only possible?"

"She thinks it's more likely that he was murdered to help cover up another crime, one that's much older. She wants to know who you trust the most."

"What?" Carmichael stared down into her tear-streaked but still pretty face, and then shrugged. "Okay. Ben — that's Adam Bennett — my deputies, and Piet van Neukirk."

"Any women?"

"I don't know many... Aline, my sister, I guess; we disagree a lot, but yeah, I trust her."

"What about your wife?"

"Died three years ago," said Carmichael, softly. "In childbirth."

"I'm sorry."

He shrugged. "Yeah."

"You're sure you can trust your deputies?"

"Picked 'em myself."

"Okay, then. Can you deputize your other friends?"

"Sure."

"Good. Now, is there anywhere in town where you can address a few hundred people, and lock the doors if necessary? A church, or a hall?"

"There's a hall," replied Carmichael. "It's too small for baseball, but we use it for basketball games, meetings, dances, things like that. Why?"

"Can you call a meeting of all the people who were out of coldsleep when the fetuses were destroyed, plus a few others?"

"Those as are still alive and living in town, sure. Who're the others? And what the Hell is this about?"

Madelon looked at him bleakly, and listened to Toure's voice in her head. "Justice," she said.

Carmichael shrugged. "Okay. When do we start?"

"YOU MAY BE WONDERING WHY I CALLED YOU HERE," said Carmichael, staring around the hall. A deputy stood at each door, armed with taser and shotgun, giving them a dozen shots each if needed. He hoped it wouldn't come to that. "Well, I'll try to keep this short. As you all know, there was a murder earlier today. Don't panic, you're not all suspects in that. I know that many of you have already had your rocket pistols checked, and I apologize for any

inconvenience. A few of you have also had your hands residue tested, and I apologize for that, too. And, of course, most of you were interviewed by Sheriff Fleischer nine years ago. Again, apologies. There's only three of you who've tested positive for residue *and* were out of coldsleep on the *Forrest* at the time someone killed ten thousand babies; two of you are deputies of mine, and the other has given me an adequate explanation. But there's at least one murderer in this room, and a few other criminals to boot. Now, I'd like you to listen to Miss Schaefer."

Madelon stood, and smiled thinly at Carmichael. It was a nice good-cop-bad-cop set-up, but after all, he would probably live here for the rest of his life, and she was leaving in less than twenty-four hours. "Good evening. I don't think any of you knew David Everett well; I'm sorry to say that I didn't, either. But I do know that he was a good medtech, good enough to look at a genescan readout and know what he was seeing." She looked around the room, knowing that Toure, Paratene and the *Altair's* computer were all seeing through her eyes as well as the cameras that had been placed around the hall. "That's how he uncovered a crime. Four days before the embryos in your gene bank were destroyed, three of them were chosen and scanned. Why this was done then, I don't know; maybe someone had become suspicious. But I do know what they found, and I suspect it's why the embryos were obliterated. All three, certainly, and probably all ten thousand, were Negroid. African. Black. Use whatever word you like," she concluded, knowing that no-one would hear her over the ensuing uproar. A few seconds later, she heard cries of "Can you prove this?" from amid the crowd. She glanced at Carmichael, who stood, and called for silence.

"The only proof that remains is the result of those gene-scans on the computer," she said. "My captain requested permission to send crew from the *Altair* to search the *Forrest* for any more evidence — it occurred to us that the people responsible for the mass destruction might have kept a few embryos as a form of insurance — but this permission was denied."

"The next question, of course, is who would have chosen these embryos, and why?"

"Sheriff Carmichael thought it might have been someone on Earth, attempting to sabotage your whites-only society." She took a deep breath. Aboard *Altair*, Toure, Paratene and Natsuki stared at the monitor, as the computer picked out the Ivorians who were showing the most stress — or who had suddenly relaxed. "And maybe this would have worked if no-one had gene-scanned the embryos before implanting them in the women here... but that didn't seem very likely. Any remotely competent geneticist would have scanned them before things reached that stage. Isn't that right, Dean Bennett?" Ben nodded.

"Strangely enough, the record shows that *none* of the human fetuses were scanned aboard the *Forrest* until those three were selected. The ship's chief geneticist, Dr. Thompson, who'd been responsible for scanning and selecting the embryos before the *Forrest* was launched, was obviously confident that he had what he'd ordered. He might have implanted them into your women without any further checking, too. Now, nearly 1900 of your 2019 women became pregnant by traditional methods within nine months of your landing. If you'd trusted to Dr. Thompson, he would have gifted you with two thousand black babies."

The uproar at this was too great for Madelon, or even Carmichael, to yell over; they waited until it had abated. "What would you have done with them?" Madelon asked. "Killed them all? Raised them as your own children? Or raised them to keep as slaves?"

The uproar at this was even louder; Carmichael stopped it by picking up a shotgun from behind the podium and pumping a round into

the chamber for firing. "Miss Schaefer doesn't know you," he barked. "I do. I know most of you are decent people. Like me, you've probably never wanted to own slaves. But what would you do if somebody gave them to you? Especially if the alternatives are letting them die, or raising them like they were your equals? Now, that's not an easy decision for me to make — and it wouldn't even be *my* baby. But my wife, if she'd been in this situation..."

The audience was silent. "Unfortunately," Carmichael continued, "Dr Thompson isn't here to defend himself, and it pains me to see him accused in his absence. But it pains me even more to see his fellow conspirators get away with it. Thompson didn't choose those embryos alone, nor was he responsible for the efforts of Sheriff Fleischer *not* to find the people responsible for their destruction, because if he *had* found them, the secret might have come out. And how many of you women would choose to knowingly be implanted with a embryo that you would then have to carry, give birth to, feed, raise — and then see enslaved?" There was a low muttering. Carmichael drew a deep breath, then said, "Mr. Mayor?"

Burgess turned to face him. "Yes?"

"Who else — apart from you and Thompson — chose those embryos? And why did you deny permission for a search of the *Forrest*?" He waited for an answer, but Burgess was silent. "Okay. Until you choose to answer those questions, please consider yourself under arrest. I've also had Mr. Earl arrested; he's on his way back here."

"WHO KILLED THE BABIES?"

Carmichael turned; an obviously pregnant woman had scrambled to her feet to call out the question. Before he could identify her, the shout had been picked up by others in the crowd. He turned to Schaefer. "You'd better tell them what you know," he said, softly. "It was still murder."

Toure stared at the monitor, shaking her head. Paratene looked at her inquisitively.

"They could have told people," Carmichael continued, "instead of killing ten thousand children."

"And done what?" muttered Toure. "Left them in a deep freeze forever?"

"They could have let *us* make the choice," said Carmichael, as though he'd been able to hear her. "They're no better than the other conspirators."

Toure looked at the screen, and then at Paratene. "Do you know?" asked the Captain.

"All I have to go on is one good suspect, a gut feeling, and the computer's reading of people's vital signs, which aren't that reliable in a crowd that size. That's not enough to justify getting a woman lynched." Toure drummed her fingers on the console. "Schaefer? Tell Carmichael we don't have enough information."

Madelon's only reply was a slow pan of the angry crowd, ending with an equally angry Carmichael.

"Okay. I'll tell him what I know, but she's to be arrested and interviewed on suspicion of murdering David Everett, not lynched for destroying the embryos. I want his *word* on that."

Madelon passed that on to Carmichael, who nodded. "You have my word," he said grimly. "Who is it?"

"There's one woman who we've been watching closely since she walked in," said Toure. "She wasn't in coldsleep when the embryos were destroyed; neither was her husband, but the duty roster says he was on duty, so she doesn't have him as an alibi. It's my guess that she had the job of distracting Wallace; she was pretty then, still is, and Carmichael said he liked blondes. She knew everyone, and asking questions was her job; Thompson or someone may have let something slip about the embryos. The computer says her heart skipped a beat and her face went pale when Schaefer mentioned the genescan, but *not* when he said what the genescan revealed, which suggests she knew what she was going to say. And she's fired a rocket pistol recently — on a target range, with witnesses, but that doesn't mean she didn't fire another round later; we just tend to assume that it does, the old purloined letter schtick again. Do I have to name her?"

Madelon relayed this information to Carmichael, who shook his head. "Jessie Randolph? She did it?"

"That's for a jury to decide," said Toure. "They do *have* juries on Ivory, don't they? I shouldn't worry too much, Schaefer. If she killed Everett, the bastards will probably give her a medal."

CARMICHAEL AND VAN NEUKIRK ESCORTED HER TO THE tilter which was to take her back to the shuttle. "I hope the town's still, uh, here when you get back," said van Neukirk, sourly. "You've stirred up a hornet's nest, Miss Schaefer. It's okay for you, but we're the ones who have to live there."

"You could come back with me," said Madelon, drily, as she climbed into the tilter. "There's room on the shuttle, and on the *Altair*."

van Neukirk laughed, and stepped back. "I'll think about it. Let me know when you find a habitable world that's even further out than this one — if that's okay with the censor, of course."

Carmichael nodded. "I don't see a problem with it."

"Hmm. Make sure you tell the new sheriff that. Who do you think people will want for mayor with Burgess, Keys, Earl and Poulsen all in jail on conspiracy charges?"

Carmichael shrugged, and climbed into the tilter. "Let's go," he snapped at the pilot.

"He's right, you know," he said, when they were airborne. "You've upset a lot of people; I just hope there's nobody on the flight path with a rocket pistol, because this thing isn't armored. I've had to deputize more people just to deal with the domestic disputes."

"Were any of them women?"

"Is that meant to be a joke?" He shuddered. "When we came here, we were hoping for a society without any divisions like this. Then you come along and create this huge gulf between men and women..."

Madelon shook her head. "We didn't stock that gene bank with prospective slaves, nor did we destroy the embryos."

"I know. Christopher Columbus wasn't the first man to discover America, either; he just told people it was there. He still got the credit and the blame."

THEY FLEW ALONG FOR A FEW MORE MILES, LOOKING DOWN at the landscape with neither of them speaking. "What's going to happen to Jessie Randolph?"

"I guess that depends on how many women Aline gets onto the jury during *voir dire*. She's admitted to shooting Everett, and to having masterminded the whole plot, though she won't tell us who else was involved; I guess she's planning to ask for mercy. Not all of the women agree with what she did, but they figure she did it for them. She told me to tell you why she did it, too; said she didn't want to be lied about on Earth or anywhere."

"What did she say?"

"Said she couldn't stand the idea of having a nigger baby growing inside her, and having to treat it like it was hers; said she'd rather kill millions of them than have that happen." Carmichael reached into a pocket on his khaki jacket and removed a data disk the size of a quarter, which he tossed to Madelon. "Said she figured every woman on the *Forrest* would feel the same way. I recorded it, if you don't believe me. Of course, I don't know what the others thought."

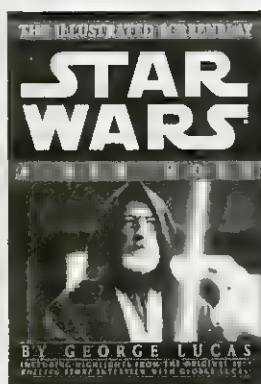
Madelon stared at the disk, then dropped it into her carry-bag.

"There's your shuttle," said Carmichael, nearly an hour later. "The ship that comes here in ten years time; do you figure to be on it?" She shook her head. "Well, then, I guess this is goodbye. I'm really sorry about David."

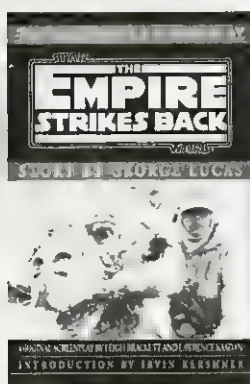
"Me too." The tilter landed, and she grabbed her bag and walked briskly to the shuttle. The ramp rolled down, and she walked up it without looking back. Carmichael waited until the shuttle had flown high enough to be invisible, and then he, too, flew home. □



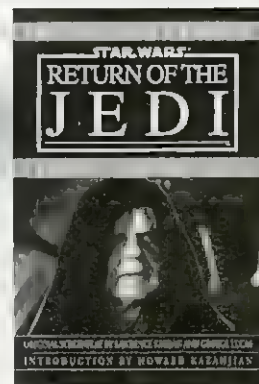
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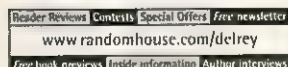


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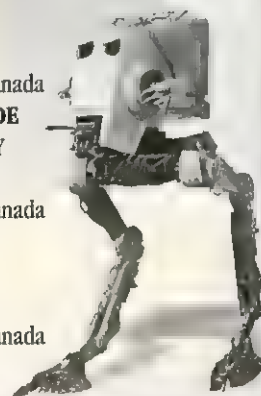
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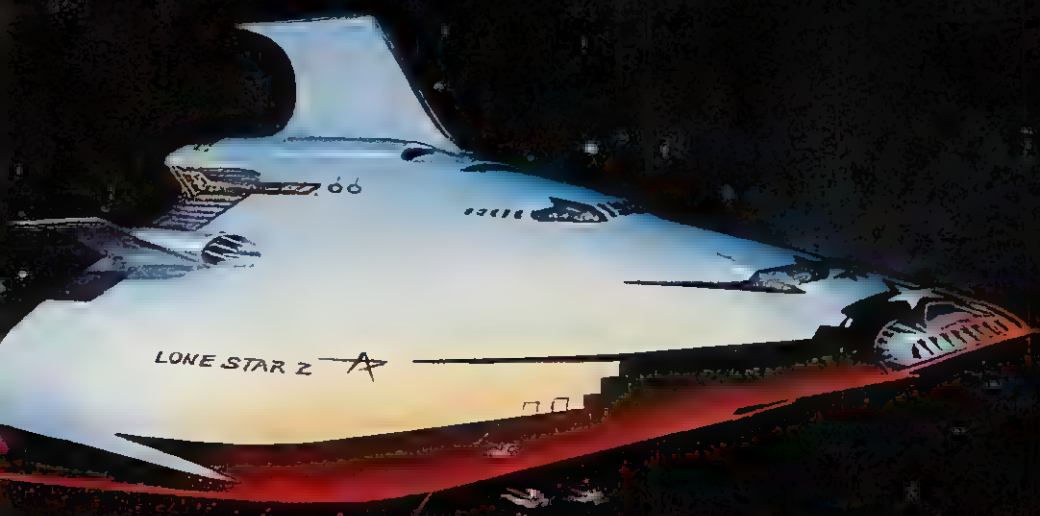
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A Celebration of
**DON
MAITZ'S**

The award-winning artist Artist Guest of Honor at the 1997 World Science Fiction Convention gives us all a glimpse into his creative heart.



SF ART

BY
KAREN
HABER



Maitz uses color as the vehicle for his powerful effects, pushing the contrasts, the complements, and the tonality. As a result, his paintings could be considered Romantic — verging on the operatic. You can see it in such characteristic Maitz works as his cover for Tanith Lee's *Tamastara*, in which an exotic woman wearing intricate jewels — or are they electronic devices?—dances framed by bullet-pocked ruins. Behind her, a sparkling science fictional city rises high above ancient walls. Or, again, in “Ghost Galaxy,” as he calls his powerful painting for *Ghost* by Piers Anthony, where Maitz depicts fireworks of imagery around a stationary spaceship. Color is employed to the hilt here, and what better means by which to illustrate a space opera or two?

By turns sinister, beguiling, and often just plain funny, the one thing that Maitz's SF work ain't is subtle. But it is distinctive and unforgettable, filled with ebullient energy, sly wit, and a wealth of crazy-making detail. As the artist himself says, “The challenge is always to portray and bring out intangible things like pride, adventure, happiness, mistrust, greed, or sorrow through imagery.”

While Maitz's fantasy work is known for its hard-edged attention to realistic detail, the artist often, paradoxically, takes a softer approach in his SF paintings, indulging in painterly effects. But, being Maitz, he isn't quite willing to forgo a telling detail or two, bringing the hardware into focus in such a way as to remind the viewer that this *is* science fiction we're talking about.

One of Maitz's favorite color techniques, luminosity, is showcased in the cover paintings he did for C. J. Cherryh's three *Cyteen* novels. In these works the contrast of hues is used to intensify the experience of color and light against a bright white background. These paintings are particularly compelling not only for their strong use of color but for the elements linking the works as detailed motifs.

Don Maitz is a courageous man in many aspects: Anyone who has seen him at the Hugo Award ceremonies, resplendent in plaid bow-tie and cummerbund, will attest to his sartorial fortitude. If further proof is required, consider this: He has illustrated not one but three books co-authored by his wife, writer/artist Janny Wurtz. It's a brave soul, indeed, who illustrates the work of one's nearest and dearest. However, Maitz is perhaps most fearless in his delirious use of color. And nowhere is that more apparent than in his science fiction illustrations.



In "Born For The Future," Maitz illustrates cloning and the concept of mechanized birth. Here, the artist suggests both the fragility and indomitability of life in his tender depiction of fetal development and infant flesh against the monotone of a mechanized white environment.

In "Cyteen II," the clipboard glimpsed in the previous painting is now held by a wide-eyed little girl who peers over the transparent incubator dome of another clone and out at the

viewer. She is the center of attention, a magnet for the eye in her bright purple dress.

In "Cyteen III," the same wide-eyed girl, grown to womanhood, confronts the viewer, but the clinical white walls of her previous environment have been reduced to a foreground of computer gear while the transparent incubator of yore is suggested by a bowl holding tropical fish. The starry universe that was previously glimpsed through a window in the first two paintings here dominates the

PREVIOUS SPREAD: Fan favorite Maitz painted this cover for the 1997 World SF Convention program book. LEFT: "Escape from Below" served as the cover to Eric van Lustbader's novel Sunset Warrior. CENTER: The cover to C. J. Cherryh's Cyteen III. ABOVE: Another Cherryh novel to feature a Maitz cover was Heavy Time.

In over two decades he has only taken a brief break from his work — to join the circus ...



background as the artist indicates that the young woman has emerged from her sterile white cocoon. Note, as well, the reflected colors in her bracelets: a very nice touch.

In "Catchworld," for the book of the same name by Chris Boyce, Maitz employs a different technique, luster, to add drama and a

sense of mystery to a familiar subject. He achieves this by keeping the field of the painting very dark save for small areas of saturated color that glow against the dark ground. This lustrous area draws the viewer's eye to the center of the work, where a frightened human being peers out of his helmet's faceplate and

straight into the unknown.

Maitz again combines dreamlike colors with hard-edged realism in "Night Raid," for *Assault On The Gods*, by Stephen Goldin, contrasting both hue and texture as he renders graceful feathered wings and deadly laser rifles in the same color complements.



LEFT: Tanith Lee's *Tamastara*. BELOW: Jack Vance's *Space Opera* allowed Maitz to show some of his whimsy. RIGHT: "Assault on the Gods" was the cover to Stephen Goldin's novel *Night Raid*.

Die-hard color freaks can really get their fix from "Escape From Below," painted for *Sunset Warrior* by Eric van Lustbader. Here Maitz treats us to a lustrous *tour de force* in which he sets a dark field in the midst of saturated colors in order to render the glowing greens that glide up the suit of the subject and draw the viewer's eyes upward to the face. Note, too, the tricky Maitz signature set along the curving blade of that evil dagger. The artist is famous for tucking away his signature as a *trompe l'oeil* tease and many Maitz fans enjoy playing "find the name."

Maitz was drawn to fantastic art by a love of the literature. He began drawing at a tender age, copying comic book panels to see if he could improve upon them. He later attended the Paier School of Art in Connecticut, where he learned the tricky skill of visualization when forced to imagine three-dimensional objects in space, rotate them, then paint them. He graduated with top honors in 1975, by which time his work had already appeared in *Marvel Comics*. In over two decades he has only taken a brief break from his work — to join the circus — when he taught art for a year at the Ringling School

of Art and Design in Sarasota, Florida.

Maitz's scroll of awards reads like an artist's wish list: A perennial Hugo candidate, he won the award in 1989 and again in 1993, and was Artist Guest of Honor at LoneStar-Con2, the 1997 World Science Fiction Convention. Maitz has received many Chesleys from the Association of Science Fiction and Fantasy Artists; the Inkpot from the San Diego Comicon; the Howard award of the World Fantasy Convention; a silver medal from the Society of Illustrators, N.Y.C.; and a bronze medal from the National Academy of Fantastic Art. His art has been exhibited at such museums and galleries as the Delaware Museum and the New Britain Museum of American Art. His paintings have been reproduced as fine art prints, cards, and picture puzzles. Two books of his work, *First Maitz* and *Dreamquests*, have become collector's items, and his work has now been translated into electronic media in the form of screensaver/wallpaper software. He's remained active in the advertising world as well, with commissions from Eastman Kodak, NBC, and Captain Morgan Rum.

Although Maitz works on both canvas and

masonite, he prefers the latter for its durability. Despite this precaution, he has not only seen his work stepped on — it was an act of clumsiness, not criticism — and then photographed for publication, with the footprint clearly visible, but also run over by a car. However, the worst experience, he said, was having his work — and Wurtz's — stolen at the end of a World Fantasy Con.

Maitz enjoys his fans' comments but asks that all praise be directed to his left ear, as he is deaf in his right ear. Taking the good with the bad, he remains affable, a lover of bad puns, and a great raconteur. As a fitting close to this celebration of his work, I'll borrow a story that the artist used to illustrate his painting "Space Opera":

"While attending a museum reception which featured an exhibit that included a few of my paintings, I was approached by an elderly gentleman. Looking distinguished in a three-piece suit, he was staring intently at one of my illustrations. He politely inquired if I was the artist. I said yes, I was. He looked back at the painting, then turned quizzically to me and asked in all seriousness, 'What do you eat?'"

"For once I was at a loss for words. Using hindsight, I should have replied that I have a most colorful palate."

Twenty-three paintings by Maitz and Wurtz were taken from a FedEx truck on October 26, 1995. A \$5,000 reward has been offered by FedEx. The paintings were on route from Florida to the World Fantasy Convention in Baltimore, MD when they disappeared. The missing art can be viewed on the World Wide Web: <http://www.westol.com/~trystane>, or by sending a SSAE to Don Maitz, 5824 Bee Ridge Road, Suite 106, Sarasota, FL 34233. If you have any information on these paintings you are encouraged to contact either the FBI (410-265-8080) or FedEx(215-937-4700).





SKIN DRAGONS TALK

Under the lunar surface,
Goro Beltran almost laughed
out loud as his coffin unsealed.
Almost.

He didn't want to give the guards one more chance to beat him to a bloody pulp. It would have made them far too happy. The dragons tattooed on his bruised arms and shoulders twitched and asked, "What's so funny?"

"I'm getting out of prison," he whispered in his native Japsañol. "In an old 20th-century yakuza movie, it would start like this."

Why would that be funny?

"Don't know. Just is."

Your limited verbalization skills: We need to work on them.

The big scarfaced guard said something in Standard Lunar Japlish to her nerdish partner, then stuck her face into Goro's and said something that the croaking electronic translator made "Talking to yourself again?" in textbook Japsañol. "I tell you — you're not only stupid, you're crazy!"

Goro grunted and got slapped for it.

You should have known, said the dragons. We knew even though we haven't fully decoded their language. She has slapped you every time you have grunted like that for the past six months.

Yes, it had been a long six months for Goro since he had been caught in that unsuccessful attempt to hijack a rival corporation's cometwater probe. Doing time was just part of the job: He'd been through it all before — having yakuza-style tattoos made him a suspected datamule, so he'd been suffering nanobug probing the entire

time. It was like a long case of a powerful mutant flu, with occasional beatings thrown in for good measure.

In the cramped corridors of the Pavlov Detention Facility, you couldn't get away.

It had been some time during that most recent living hell that Goro's dragon tattoos had begun to move and talk. He hadn't thought that was strange. Maybe he was going crazy, and that was just part of the job, too.

You should have known that the other corporations would plant guards in the prison, said the dragons.

Yes, Goro thought, his lips moving slightly, but making no noise. *But I was ordered to hijack the probe. I am a loyal Motocorp organization member. I follow orders.*

Scarface asked the Nerd something in Japlish and the translator croaked out, "The nanobugs find anything in his tattoos?" in Japsañol a few seconds later. They wanted Goro to understand and be intimidated.

"Naw," said the Nerd, "but the ink structure is unnecessarily complex. Who knows what could be hidden in there? Them yakuza hackers are damn clever."

Scarface leaned into Goro's sweat-covered brow. "For the last time — are you a datamule?"

"Don't know," said Goro.

"Don't know," the Nerd mimicked. "You don't know anything, do you?" The translator distorted his tone of voice.

"You're the stupidest prisoner we've had in a long time." Scarface powered up her pain prod, causing the translator to cough up static.

The Nerd giggled, his magnified eyes squinting behind his thick glasses.

Goro winced.

Pain, said the dragons, is merely information.

The agonizing information overloaded Goro's battered nervous system.

A large capacity for input, said the dragons. Still need to work on storage and retrieval.

Goro almost laughed out loud.

He really couldn't this time. The pain and his thoughts forced his lips into a moronic grin that disgusted Scarface and the Nerd.

All Goro's life, somebody or other had been working on him, trying to make him better. It never worked. They would always get frustrated, and end up lashing out at him, with either cruel words or violent blows, or sometimes both.

As Scarface and the Nerd did.

They kept at him, but Goro's face was frozen into that hideous grin. After a while, he made a gurgling sound that was a monstrous parody of a laugh.

Scarface and the Nerd stopped hitting and kicking when they heard that awful sound. Their mouths hung silently open as something not human looked them over through Goro's eyes.

The Nerd wept.

Scarface picked up a package with shaking hands. "Here's a fresh kimono and a transportation token card. Get dressed and get the expletive out of here." The translator voice was a lot steadier than Scarface's.

They couldn't look at Goro anymore. As if his nudity offended them. Or maybe they, too, could see the tattooed dragons moving and talking. He could feel them move as he slipped into the daytime glow pink prison kimono.

At last, they said, we can get a look at this world.

Goro held his breath as the door hissed open and spat him out. He was free — or at least as free as one could be on the Moon.

At first the light blinded him — in the prison, light came only when the guards could shine it directly into his eyes, then ask questions until he longed for the darkness and the stench of the coffin.

Goro squinted. The light was painful at first, but he could get used to it as he took deep breaths and realized that the air didn't stink from his own secretions. It was warm, dry, and had a subtly perfumed scent.

He closed his eyes, and took another deep breath.

"Yes, Goro," a familiar voice said in Japsañol, "breathe while you still can."

Goro's eyes snapped open. He turned and saw Ironeyes, a notorious Motocorp enforcer who was good enough and rich enough to afford a comet-water pendant, a big one glowing with its own internal light source. Ironeyes smiled with unnaturally perfect teeth, and raised his left hand, grabbing his little finger. With a crisp pop, the artificial finger came off. He held the prosthetic up for Goro to see.

With a nervous smile Goro held up his hands. The little fingers were missing from both.

The two thugs standing behind Ironeyes laughed. All three members of the enforcement team had swords hanging from their belts, still in their hilts, and not turned on.

"Both completely gone," said the tall female thug.

"What a loser," said the short, musclebound male thug.

"How many years have you been with Motocorp, Goro?" asked Ironeyes.

Goro counted. His eyelids fluttered as his eyes rolled back into his skull.

Ironeyes and the thugs laughed.

Ability for mathematics undeveloped, said the dragons. Must make adjustments.

"Eight," Goro said. "I've been with Motocorp for eight years."

"Amazing that he has any fingers left," Ironeyes said.

The thugs dutifully laughed.

Say something, the dragons said.

"You come to take me to Tranquility?" came out of Goro's mouth.

"Of course," said Ironeyes. "You're so stupid that you may never find your way back on your own."

The dragons squirmed on Goro's arms and shoulders. The pink kimono itched. He reached under his collar and scratched.

"Uh, you got civilian clothes for me?" Goro found himself asking.

The thugs looked at one another and shook their heads.

Ironeyes flashed his ceramic teeth. "No, bright boy. A third-class thug like you doesn't deserve to go back to civilization in fashionable dress. Sheriff Moe and the oyabun agree that you've got to be made an example, so folks gotta see you in a pink kimono."

At first Goro's jaw dropped. Then the dragons took control. He closed his mouth and stood up straight.

Each thug grabbed one of Goro's shoulders as they shoved him down the corridor to the waiting mag-lev tube train. It was a freighter that moved supplies and products around the far side, but there was one car for prisoners coming in and out of Pavlov.

They threw Goro into a corner bench. No one talked during the long ride. There were no windows in the car. Motion was barely perceivable. A monitor screen above eye level displayed a public service channel.

Transportation requires patience, said the dragons.

Goro tried not to react.

He also tried not to look at the monitor. The dragons made him strain to look at it.

"Been away from vid for a while, huh, Goro?" said Ironeyes, causing the others to burst into laughter that was too enthusiastic for the situation.

The public service channel had only three short programs: First was a word scroll of tourist activities scheduled for the upcoming week in Tranquility City. The next was a nondenominational spot on the comet water's benefits to physical and spiritual health; it showed a beautiful young model actually drinking some from a small vial, then smiling with a transcendental glow. (*Primitive superstition, said the dragons, something we can take advantage of.*) The other was a spot in which Sheriff Moe smiled and said, "On my Moon, if you use a gun, you get your head cut off."

Logical, said the dragons. Explosive projectile weapons would be destructive to this fragile artificial environment.

Then an actual decapitation, in a spacesuit, on the lunar surface was shown.

The three-part program was repeated in an infinity loop.

During the comet-water spot Ironeyes would caress his pendant.

Every time the executioner's sword powered up, the thugs got excited. The helmet would fall in slow motion, spilling the severed head; and when they simultaneously hit the surface, raising a cloud of lunar dust, the thugs laughed. They laughed every time the spot was shown, for the entire ride to Tranquility City.

The dragons kept Goro's eyes locked on the screen.

Primitive audiovisual information system, they said. Slow, inefficient, but adequate for this species.

Goro ignored it all. He worried about his fate. It could be anything from the loss of another knuckle to decapitation. He looked at his hands and sighed.

With three fingers on each there was at least a pleasant symmetry. It almost seemed normal, even though it made him look like a cartoon character.

Suddenly the train jerked to a stop, the door belched open, and the light, sound, and smells of Tranquility City hit him like a ton of bricks.

An information-rich environment, said the dragons. This will be useful.

Goro found himself looking around like a tourist.

The thugs laughed at him.

"What's the matter, Goro?" said Ironeyes. "Never seen the big city before? Six months in jail make it all seem something, like, wonderful?" He looked around, and grinned. "Still the same old pile of trash!"

The dragons stirred. *An information-rich environment. Much to be learned.*

Goro twitched.

Ironeyes and the thugs kept laughing.

Information in many modes. Visual images, symbolic languages, crude attempts at multisensory mind control, signals carried on electromagnetic waves not accessible to the host without technological back up . . . Also, the host only understands a small part of the verbal languages available, and none of them in visual symbolic mode. . . . Why, Goro, you're illiterate!

Goro was about to ask what that meant.

We must do something about that . . .

him a headache. But now, no problem. He understood it completely. He opened his eyes. Before him were a crowd of tourists, a pretty little tour guide with a bullhorn, and two fully armored and armed Lunar Sheriff's Deputies.

"SEE HOW COWARDLY HE IS," said the tour guide, with a graceful wave of her hand. "HE DID NOT WANT TO FACE JUSTICE WITH HIS EYES OPEN."

Some of the tourists spoke Standard Japanese. Goro suddenly found it perfectly understandable. He was understanding those who spoke Global Spanish, too.

"NOTE THE LOOK OF IDIOTIC TERROR ON HIS FACE," the tour guide added.

"Go on," said Ironeyes, pushing Goro toward the deputies.

The deputies raised their riotclubs and pompously marched toward Goro. But what made him shake with fear was that he could read the words LUNAR DEPUTY on the brow of their helmets.

What have you done to me? Goro almost said out loud.

We are augmenting your language and symbol-processing skills. There are many ways to access information in your world. You

In the prison, light came only when the guards could shine it directly into his eyes, then ask questions until he longed for the darkness and the stench of the coffin.

Suddenly he knew what it meant, and more. He stopped, paralyzed. His eyes rolled up in his head. His jaw fell slack, tongue lolled out. His knees buckled. He nearly fell, but the thugs caught him.

A knee slammed into one of his kidneys.

"Watzamatter?" asked the female thug. "Too much for your stupid brain?"

The male thug giggled, was about to take his own crack at Goro when Ironeyes caught his fist.

"Naw," Ironeyes said, "we gotta save it for the cops."

"They get all the fun," said the male thug.

Goro barely noticed them. The dragons seemed to have flowed off his arms and shoulders and into his brain, where they were doing a high-speed electrical dance that was sending sparks crackling up and down his nerves, making his limbs twitch. He was scared. He was either dying or the whole universe was changing around him.

"You really are a pile of walking trash," said Ironeyes.

He jerked his chin at the two thugs and they hauled Goro along with them, ignoring his twitches.

After a while, Goro got used to the new chaos in his brain. He even managed to walk on his own. As the thugs led him down the main corridor, he closed his eyes, afraid to see. What he could hear was horrifying enough; the noise of the crowd was suddenly full of voices he could understand.

Standing out from all the voices was an amplified one:

"WELL, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, OUR SPECIAL GUEST IS FINALLY HERE. HE'S LATE, BUT YOU KNOW THAT CRIMINALS HAVE NO RESPECT FOR THINGS LIKE SCHEDULES. HE'S A MINOR THUG JUST BACK FROM PAVLOV FOR TRYING TO HIJACK A COMETWATER PROBE. INTERFERING WITH INTERPLANETARY COMMERCE AS WELL AS THE SPIRITUAL WELL-BEING OF THOSE WHO CAN AFFORD COMETWATER."

The voice was speaking in Standard English. Before, Goro could barely understand Standard English, just trying would have given

can tap into only a fragment of it. How do you get by in such a limited manner?

A riotclub hit Goro's head. A white-hot flash of light blinded him and silenced the dragons.

Goro's eyelids fluttered. He tried to say something, but it came out as an unintelligible groan.

Another riotclub got him squarely across the shoulder blades. There was another flash of light and pain. He lost his balance.

The tourists cheered as he fell to the ground. The pretty, young tour guide said something that was drowned out by the flashes of pain.

When he was on the ground, he lost track of the impacts of riotclubs and armored boots. The flashes of pain grew cool, and glittered like the comet-water pendant that many of the tourists were wearing.

The tourists enthusiastically handed casino chips to the deputies as tips for the show. The pretty, young tour guide smiled and pointed out another of the dazzling sights of Tranquility City — it seemed to be one of the casinos, a new one, or perhaps just a façade that had been installed over an old one while Goro was in jail.

It was bright and colorful. It moved and pulsed. It was all hopelessly blurred so Goro couldn't tell what it was.

Crackling through his flesh and brain, the dragons tried to decode it all. Goro didn't understand why. He would have laughed at them if he hadn't been about to black out. It had been a long time ago, back on Earth, as a boy in the Kyoto barrio, that he had given up on trying to understand things.

It had never seemed worthwhile. Oblivion was so tempting. He slipped into it. Goro was suddenly torn out of the pleasant blankness of unconsciousness when a wakefast autoinjector was jabbed into his left arm.

The dragons had been busy all that time.

Goro's eyelids snapped open, letting in a flood of light-borne information: He was in a brightly lit though information-poor room. Other than a large, framed photograph of Sheriff Moe and the oyabun shak-

She made her artificially cobalt blue eyes look so big and sad that it was almost funny. "Oh, Goro, honey. How could you ask such a thing?"

ing hands (and drinking a toast from tiny comet-water glasses) and some racks of plain white spacesuits, the walls were bare. Ironeyes and the thugs were with him, already sealed in spacesuits. Ironeyes held the empty autoinjector, smiling at the trace of Goro's blood on the end. The thugs pulled a spacesuit off the rack and shoved it at Goro.

"Get dressed," said Ironeyes as he tossed aside the autoinjector. "We're going to see the oyabun."

Quite an anxiety reaction here, said the dragon.

Goro's hands shook as he got into the spacesuit. The little fingers of the gloves hung empty as he put them on. He had a feeling that his hands would be even more mutilated soon.

Why worry about losing part of a finger? said the dragons. You have so many fingers. Too many. And you never really use them all. If a body part isn't essential, why not cut it off?

As soon as Goro had his suit sealed, the thugs grabbed him and shoved him toward the air lock door. It belched as it opened. Ironeyes and the thugs followed Goro in. The door closed behind them.

Goro held his breath as the air was sucked away.

Soon the outer door opened without a sound, and Goro was pushed out onto the lunar surface. He landed on his hands and knees, sending up a cloud of dust. The dust hung in the air and stuck to his suit, temporarily blinding him.

The dust was raked into linear patterns, said the dragons, evidence of aesthetic considerations.

Goro's heart nearly exploded when he realized that he was in the oyabun's zen garden. And he had just ruined the arrangement. The oyabun probably wouldn't be satisfied with the removal of a finger joint. His fate would more likely be decapitation now. There was no point in even getting to his feet again. He stayed down like a dog.

Laughter crackled through his helmet radio. The laughter of Ironeyes, and the thugs, and yet another familiar laugh. He knew it so well. He just didn't immediately recognize it.

A delay between perception and cognition, said the dragon. It must be attended to . . .

Goro felt them squirm through his skin and spark through his nerves and brain again, as the dust sank back to the surface. The unrecognized laugh grew until it dominated the inside of Goro's helmet. He squinted through his faceplate until he found a man in an elegant spacesuit that allowed total freedom of movement. The man was holding an antistatic rake, carefully applying it to the dust that Goro had disturbed. Goro didn't have to look at the tiny monitor over the mirrored faceplate to know that this was the oyabun of Motocorp. Goro rose to a respectful kneeling position.

The oyabun raked around him, making the disruptions part of the design.

"This is one of him secrets of successful management," the oyabun said, his gaze fixed on his rake. "Chaos and the unexpected happen. Do not try to fight them, instead, achieve harmony and balance by incorporating them into your business."

He regarded the new design for a long moment; then turned his attention to Goro. "And you, my son are. . . ." His head momentarily cocked to observe a headup faceplate display. "Your name is . . . Goro . . . Beltran . . . Beltran? That's not a Japanese name . . ."

"No," Goro found himself saying, "it is Spanish."

"Your records show that you were born in Japan."

"My family originally came from Peru."

"Oh, yes . . . that wave of undocumented workers who came in the late 20th century," the oyabun checked the display again. "How ironic that you are an undocumented worker on the Moon!"

The dragons stirred, and jolted him into saying, "Someone has to do the dirty work."

Goro braced himself in anticipation of a beating.

Ironeyes and the thugs smiled.

They all looked at the oyabun's face display monitor. At first, a stern frown loomed large from the tiny screen. Then he snapped into a smile. Then a laugh.

"Your intelligence rating does not indicate the capacity for such wit," the oyabun said, "but then, most methods of measuring intelligence cannot be trusted."

The airlock suddenly belched out another spacesuited figure.

"Ah," said the oyabun, "our other guest has arrived. Goro Beltran, I would like you to meet Jimmy Doi."

Jimmy scrambled to his feet, and bowed to Goro. Goro bowed back.

"Jimmy, Goro," the oyabun said, "you really do have a lot in common. Both Thugs third class. Both have dismally low intelligence and performance ratings. Both have just been released from one of the Moon's many detention facilities. Both have proven loyalty to Motocorp by resisting the interrogations of the authorities. My problem is, are you still worth keeping in Motocorp? Should the organization be obliged to return your loyalty?"

Jimmy and Goro both tried not to look scared.

The oyabun then made a subtle hand gesture. A servant in an ornate spacesuit came out of the airlock, holding a sword in each hand.

The servant gave the swords to the oyabun, bowed and left.

Ironeyes showed more of his ceramic teeth than was normally possible. The thugs giggled.

The oyabun held the handles of the swords out to Goro and Jimmy. "Are you loyal to Motocorp?"

They both stood up straight at shouted, "Yes!"

"Are you loyal to Motocorp to the death?"

"Yes!"

"Then take these swords," the oyabun's voice boomed, "and fight to the death."

Goro immediately found himself holding the sword, facing Jimmy.

The oyabun stood back, crossed his arms.

Simultaneously, and without the aid of those who held them, the swords turned on, laseredges gleaming.

Ironeyes and the thugs stepped back, grinning with delight.

Goro was nervous. He had never been very good with a sword. He always preferred getting in close and using his fists. He could die today after all. Jimmy's face on his tiny helmet screen showed a frightening determination.

Emergency! said the dragons. Access and download necessary information at high speed. Life or death situation. They squirmed and crackled from his brain stem to his fingertips.

The dragons took control, dragging Goro along, forcing him to pay close attention.

Jimmy seemed to be moving in slow motion as he lunged at Goro. He was grinning like a lunatic. The edge of his sword left a serpentine, glowing trail at it moved toward Goro's faceplate. The dragons

thought it was very pretty.

Goro waited for his doom, but the dragons had other ideas. *Learn*, they said.

He was unnaturally aware of how they were moving his body, moving his sword to block Jimmy's. He reflexively pulled away from the energy blast when the two laseredges came together so he wouldn't lose control. But he didn't close his eyes during the flash. The dragons absorbed the light, hungrily.

Jimmy was a good swordsman, but his humanity failed him. The flash caused his eyes to close, just for a split-second. For Goro they seemed shut for almost a minute. Jimmy's sword did not move during this time.

Without any conscious thought, Goro sent his sword around Jimmy's. By the time Jimmy's eyes opened, there was a long cut in his spacesuit. Its edges billowed as the air rushed out.

The dragons switched Goro back to realtime as Jimmy fell to the ground, his sword flying from his twitching hand, still glowing, end-over-end past the one-quarter Earth. Lunar gravity made Jimmy still seem to be in slow motion, like in an old movie; but ultimately he hit the neatly raked ground, sending up plumes of fine dust that hung aloft and slowly settled like cobwebs. He thrashed around for some time before he suffocated.

Your species' existence on this world is fragile, said the dragons. Your adaptations to new environments are clumsy.

After Jimmy finally stopped moving, nobody said anything for a while. Goro turned off his sword and stared at the corpse. He had killed before, and didn't mind that part of it, but the presence of a dead human body always bothered him.

Individuals are inconsequential, said the dragons. Only the collective matters. Death is a function of life.

The oyabun's voice broke the radio silence: "Well done Goro! And your swordplay rating had been so low! You must have been practicing. I like to see employees improve themselves."

With a great effort, Goro took his eyes off the corpse and looked around. Ironeyes and the thugs looked horrified; their hands were on their sword hilts. The oyabun calmly walked toward Goro, carrying his antistatic rake. He leaned over Jimmy's corpse and examined how its movements had destroyed the pattern he had just put down.

"This ritual duel has shown which of you would best serve Motocorp," he said. "Congratulations, Goro! Keep improving yourself. You will still have to undergo the traditional punishment, of course. Tradition is very important, especially on the Moon. Ironeyes, you and your assistants take care of that."

Ironeyes took the sword from Goro. The thugs grabbed him and pushed him toward the airlock.

The oyabun began to rake the scattered dust around Jimmy's body. "When your pattern is disturbed by the unexpected," he said, "assimilate the disturbance into your pattern." He raked around the corpse, using its outline and the scars in the dust as a guide. "An excellent management technique, but also good aesthetics."

Inside, the thugs had barely desuited when they grabbed Goro's arms again. The dragons writhed under his sleeves, but the thugs didn't seem to notice. They made him hold out his left hand. Ironeyes held a small device that was all too familiar to Goro. Soon a notch in the device was gleaming with laser light. The third finger on Goro's left hand was fitted into the notch, just at the first knuckle.

With a flash of white-hot pain, the knuckle came off, and at a speed slower than it would on Earth, fell to the carpeted floor.

Goro grimaced. A wispy strand of smoke rose from the cauterized wound.

Fascinating, said the dragons.

Ironeyes and the thugs laughed the same way they had when they had watched the video loop of the execution. They laughed as if it was first time that day they had done so. Life was apparently an unending delight to them.

Goro was glad that the humiliation was dulled by the pain. At least it was until the dragons made adjustments so that they could take in the entire experience, unhappy feelings and all. He was given a suit and shoes that wouldn't be a disgrace to the organization (and that

also wouldn't identify him as being freshly released from prison). A slim-brimmed hat was provided to hide his unstylishly shaven head. He was also issued a shiny new sword and a Motocorp credit card.

"It's better than you deserve," said Ironeyes, cheerfully. He turned his back on Goro and sauntered out of the airlock, leaving the door open. The thugs grinned at Goro over their shoulders as they followed.

He stood there for a long time after they had gone, pain and misery throbbing up from his newly cauterized wound, straight to his heart. He didn't try to fight it. He just waited for it to go away, like he always had.

Healing process much too slow, said the dragons. They accelerated it. Goro liked that, it felt good. It made him dizzy and high.

We know enough about pain now, said the dragons. Now show us pleasure.

Goro was ready. He looked like a gambler ready to cruise the casinos. It was R & R time.

R and R? asked the dragons, then answered themselves: *Rest and Recuperation. Why do you need rest? You were confined in a box for six months. Why don't you want more stimulation?*

"That box was torture," Goro said, surprised at how good he was getting at subvocalizing. "It nearly killed me."

You can talk to us without using your vocal apparatus. Try it.

Talk without . . . Goro was incredulous, but found himself doing it. *So I can.*

We are making you more efficient.

I don't want to be efficient.

Your desires are of no consequence.

To Hell with you. I like my desires. I'm using this time off to go to my favorite whorehouse to visit my favorite whore.

The dragons scanned for meaning. *Sex? Sexual reproduction. Highly inefficient. Can lead to uncontrollable diversity and evolutionary chaos.*

I like a little chaos now and then.

Your species has serious problems. We will have to deal with them. Must observe.

To Goro's delight, the dragons slipped into his unconscious level to study human sexuality. He strutted his way to the tram that would take him to the Pink Sector. It was a short ride. The Pink Sector was a short ride no matter where you were in Tranquility City. Good planning.

By the time he had arrived, he was smiling in anticipation of entering Madam Kowalski's and seeing Daisy Mae again. The dragons had zapped all of the pain and fatigue from his system; he practically flew there. Up the stairs and past the guards (who winked at him), and there was Daisy Mae, as if she had been waiting just for him.

"Why Goro!" Daisy Mae said, sounding delighted, the way she always did, "it's so nice to see you!" Only this time he could see that she was surprised. This time he was somehow more aware that she was acting.

In the past, your perceptions have been unclear, unfocused. Like those of the rest of your species, said the dragons.

Goro didn't even react, he just buried his face in Daisy Mae's gleaming pink cleavage, ignoring the tiny, teardrop-shaped comet-water pendant that dug into his cheek. He scooped Daisy up into his arms and ran up the stairs with her, into her room, slamming the door shut behind them with one foot.

In the long run, said the dragons, denial is counterproductive as a survival tool.

Goro threw Daisy onto the pink, lacy bed. The sight of her sprawled there was all the answer he needed. He joined her there, got lost in her bleached-blond and silicone, classic Hollywood beauty.

Life is not a movie, said the dragons, after it was all over, and Goro was staring at the posters of long-dead actors and actresses that lined Daisy's ceiling.

"I can try to make it so," Goro said, forgetting to subvocalize.

"What was that?" Daisy Mae said from the bathroom. She always had a sensitive bladder.

"Oh nothing." Goro looked at his arms. The dragons were moving again.

"Well," Daisy Mae said, bouncing back toward the bed, "this is your lucky day, Goro, my sweet. I've had a cancelation. We can spend some extra time together."

"How much will it cost me?" Goro asked on reflex.

She made her artificially cobalt blue eyes look so big and sad that it was almost funny. "Oh, Goro, honey. How could you ask such a thing? Don't you know that you're my special one?"

He didn't move as she glided onto the bed, over him.

She's lying, said the dragons.

Of course she is. Goro remembered to subvocalize this time. *She's a whore*.

This is a trap. You — we — are in danger.

Yeah, ain't it wonderful?

The dragons darted across his skin.

Daisy Mae screamed and rolled off Goro. She looked at her hands, then at him. Her cobalt blue irises had dilated into thin rings.

"Goro," she said, trembling, "what?"

He looked at himself. The dragons were still moving. She could see them!

The door burst open. Three figures in old-fashioned black ninja suits jumped in, with their swords drawn and on.

Goro reached for his own sword on the nightstand. It wasn't there.

The dragons switched him into fighting mode. The rest of the world shifted into slow motion. If my life has to be a movie, Goro had time to think, why couldn't the director be a little less pretentious?

Goro grabbed the nightstand, a couple of pillows, and the tangled bedsheet, and threw them at the ninjas.

One of the ninjas was hit on his sword arm by the nightstand. The other two slashed the sheet and pillows, which caught fire from the laseredges. The fires set off the room's heat detectors. Jets emerged from the mouths of the movie stars on the ceiling and rained fire-extinguishing snow on the room below, covering everything and blinding the ninjas.

Goro had already shut his eyes. The dragons could see perfectly well.

He rolled off the bed and threw the mattress at the ninjas. The ninjas slashed about madly. Soon there was enough polyfoam debris floating around the room to give him time to find his sword.

He couldn't find it.

Daisy Mae had been screaming the whole time, though it sounded like a long, drawn-out croak to Goro. Then suddenly she stopped.

As Goro turned to see what had happened, her left arm, shoulder, head, and part of her neck (neatly cut off and cauterized by the laser so there was no blood), hit him in the chest. One of the ninjas had killed her by accident.

Goro got mad.

The slow motion in the room got slower, almost freezing into immobility. It was easy for Goro to reach out and grab the arm of the ninja who had killed Daisy Mae, twist it until the sword popped free into cluttered air. He caught the sword as if it weren't moving at all.

Soon the heads of all three ninjas were free of their bodies and sinking toward the floor.

Emotions provide motivation and performance enhancement, said the dragons. Interesting.

It took a while for Goro to get out of fighting mode. Things sped up, but it took time.

This slowness to adapt, said the dragons, *we must do something about it*.

Goro shuddered at what that would mean.

He found himself looking for the sword he had been issued. It wasn't anywhere around the bed, or under any of debris and corpses. Finally, he found it in the bathroom, hidden behind the wastebasket, next to the toilet.

He picked it up, and thumbed the o-off. It did not turn on.

Goro was confused. He didn't even notice that he was moving at normal speed again.

You were set up, said the dragons. *Daisy Mae called them while you were trying to block us out*.

She must be working for a rival organization, Goro subvocalized. *No, she contacted Motocorp, and they sent the assassins*.

"No!" Goro said out loud. "I am a loyal employee! They just took me back in after doing time for them!"

Your denial will not change reality, said the dragons.

I have to get out of here, the sheriff's deputies will be here any time now.

He sifted through the debris, first found part of Daisy Mae's body. *I never expected her to love me*, he thought, *but somehow I still feel betrayed*.

It's just business, said the dragons.

He found the ninjas' swords; they were the same Shakazulu 3000s that Motocorp issued.

No, Goro thought, *it couldn't be*.

It is, said the dragons.

Goro fumbled around, found one of the ninja corpses, peeled back a sleeve to reveal a tattooed arm. Dancing dragons, just like his, except they didn't move or talk. Hopefully.

He brought his right arm up to the dead ninja's, so the faces of two dragons almost touched. Motocorp's company ID was built into the eyes of the dragon tattoos. If this guy was really from Motocorp ...

All four dragon eyes glowed.

Goro didn't say anything for a while, just let out a low, guttural growl and sat down in the debris on the floor between the bodies of Daisy Mae and the ninja. The shifting fallout began to cover him.

"Motocorp, the oyabun," he said, "they betrayed me!"

Loyalties are relative, said the dragons.

"I was loyal!" he screamed.

There was suddenly the sound of people approaching the door. *You have to get out of here*, said the dragons.

A hulking figure appeared at the door. It was completely covered in leather studded with metal spikes. One of Madam Kowalski's notorious authorized-to-kill bouncers.

Goro didn't have to stop to think, or wait for the dragons to help him; he picked up a Shakazulu 3000, turned it on, pointed it at the bouncer, screamed like a digitally-amplified movie samurai, and charged with the wrath of God in his eyes. The bouncer moved out of the way, but not fast enough to avoid losing some leather to Goro's sword. Goro didn't slow down until he had made it through the halls, bruising and terrifying whores and customers alike. Like a polyfoam-covered demon, he burst out into the street.

Once there he didn't have to run any more. No one really noticed him. Among the strutting whores, gawking xtourists, flickering holos, snatches of music, and ever-present casino noises, he just didn't stand out.

He turned off the sword, slowed to a walk, tried to nonchalantly brush some of the foam off himself.

Excellent, said the dragons, *you are improving*.

So what? My life is over. Why did Motocorp have to betray me? Why couldn't those ninjas have been Criblos or Ruskimafs? Why my own gang?

You really don't know, do you?

What?

The reason you are being treated differently now.

And just what is it?

Us.

How can that be?

We can't explain now. You have to get out, far away, they probably know that you've killed their assassins by now, and have sent more.

Goro laughed. *Now it's you stupid dragons that don't understand. There isn't anyplace for me to go. I've been disowned by my boss, and the Moon's not as big as you might think . . .*

The dragons squirmed with the rhythm of laughter. *The universe is bigger than you think, Goro.*

Yeah, like it's ever done me any good.

A big universe is full of places to hide.

Suddenly, the dragons made Goro's eyes turn to the left and focus into the distance. He saw three obvious thug-types with large reddish-blond Afro hairdos. One pointed directly at him, the others nodded. The team began powerwalking toward Goro.

They're from the Afro-Aryan Nation, thought Goro. What would the mulatto supremacists want with me?

Not you, us. The dragons turned Goro's head around, focused and refocused his eyes. More thugs coming. Criblo, Ruskimaf, Triadon, Bikvik, Globovudu, Rastaco, and other markings. There were even some swaggering around in tourist garb, trying not to be seen — Sheriff Moe's posse.

Thugs of all kinds were lurking about, as they noticed him, and more were casually moving in his direction.

Why would they all want you? asked Goro.

All this time and you never asked why.

A loyal employee never asks why.

Too bad that we don't have time to explain. You have to get out of here.

But where? It's not like I can just leap out an airlock and run away across the surface.

Why not?

Goro almost laughed, but then things occurred to him. *They wouldn't expect me to do that — it would be suicide. But, with a spacesuit, and your help . . .*

just lock me up when I got out of jail?

The dragons laughed. *We are an unknown factor. Motocorp knew something was inside you; they could detect us with the nanosystems in the ink of your tattoos.*

So I am a datamule.

Yes, but whose datamule? As we were saying, they didn't know what we were or what we would do. They decided to wait and watch.

They were afraid. Motocorp, the oyabun, are afraid of you.

Yes.

And now they're afraid of me.

Yes.

This is very, very disturbing.

Yes, Goro, it is supposed to be. Our mission is to disturb. And to make way for the invasion.

Goro laughed. *Now who's sounding like a movie?*

Suddenly, something on the horizon caught Goro's eye. Something familiar. *I'm tired, he thought, need to rest.*

We can make you not have to rest, said the dragons.

No, Goro insisted. I want to rest!

Thinking for yourself. This is something new . . .

He shifted from kangaroo to bunny hops, and made his way to a large cylinder-shaped object that had left the scars of a violent impact in the regolith. It was like a huge tank, made out of a polymer that was undergoing molecular breakdown under exposure to sunlight and

We are a life-form from another world. The closest thing to us you know of would be — viruses.

Yes, we could help you hide out and defend yourself, but it is us that they want.

I wish I could just give you to them.

Without getting something in return? That's not very smart.

Yeah, looks like I'm going to be smart whether I like it or not. Now where could I get a spacesuit?

He wondered briefly, until he passed the Ye Olde Space Age Hotel and Casino. For a few hundred yen, anyone could rent a suit and kick up all the Moondust he wanted. He bought some chips with his credit card. He figured that the Motocorps monitors would assume he was gambling — and would send more ninjas to Ye Olde Space Age.

He paid for a two-hour suit rental and was soon on the surface, looking up at a crescent Earth, calmly walking, sword in hand — for no casino employee would dream of taking someone's sword away — to the perimeter of the roped-off tourist zone.

An alarm went off when he leaped over the rope.

His suit warned, "You have crossed the limits of the designated area for tourist moonwalking. Please go back. Remember that you only have a two hour supply of air. Your safety is our utmost concern."

"Shut up," said Goro as he broke into the usual kangaroo hop that served best for long treks across the surface. He went across the Moon buggy zone, knowing that his tracks would soon be obliterated. He made each hop bigger, and went in an irregular, zigzag course, so it would be difficult to follow.

So, he asked once more, what are you that all the gangs want you?

We are a life-form from another world. The closest thing to us you know of would be — viruses.

You're germs!

Something similar, only far more sophisticated.

Goro then remembered the hijacking attempt, getting splashed by the comet water. *You came from a comet?*

Not exactly. We have found that comets provide an excellent way to enter a solar system undetected.

Goro frowned. *If they wanted you so badly, why didn't the oyabun*

cosmic radiation, so that it had a flaky, almost furry appearance. The impact had shattered it, leaving huge cracks, one Goro could easily step through.

He had to turn on his helmet lamps to see inside. He was afraid of what he might find. His stomach churned, but the dragons settled it. Not wanting to see, he looked closer.

The object, a crude disposable spacecraft, was full of corpses that had become freeze-dried in exposure to the near-vacuum. Men, women, children — they were space age mummies, in a throwaway tomb. People who had paid money they had scraped together slaving away in one of the Earth's many megaslums to some snakehead coyotes to shoot them to a new life as illegal aliens on the Moon.

Goro shed a tear, tried to wipe it away with a gauntleted hand that was stopped by the faceplate of his helmet. This made him grunt, almost laugh.

"I came to the Moon on one of these," he said out loud, not caring, because he wasn't really talking to the dragons. "It broke open on impact, too. Only we were lucky. The snakehead coyotes found us before we all died."

Your ancestors came from Peru to Japan, said the dragons. You came from Japan to the Moon. You are like us in many ways, Goro. When the time comes, you cross the borders, enter the new frontiers. We are pioneers. You should join our gang.

"I'm not a talking disease!" Goro said.

That depends upon whom you ask. Perceptions are tricky. Are you really so sure that your gang isn't enslaving you, and we haven't set you free? Your own world denied your very existence. A civilization in denial is easily conquered. Your habit of ignoring parts of reality will allow us to invade without being noticed.

He turned on his sword, looked at the corpses revealed by the laser light. *"I wish I could kill you!"*

But you can't do that without killing yourself, can you?

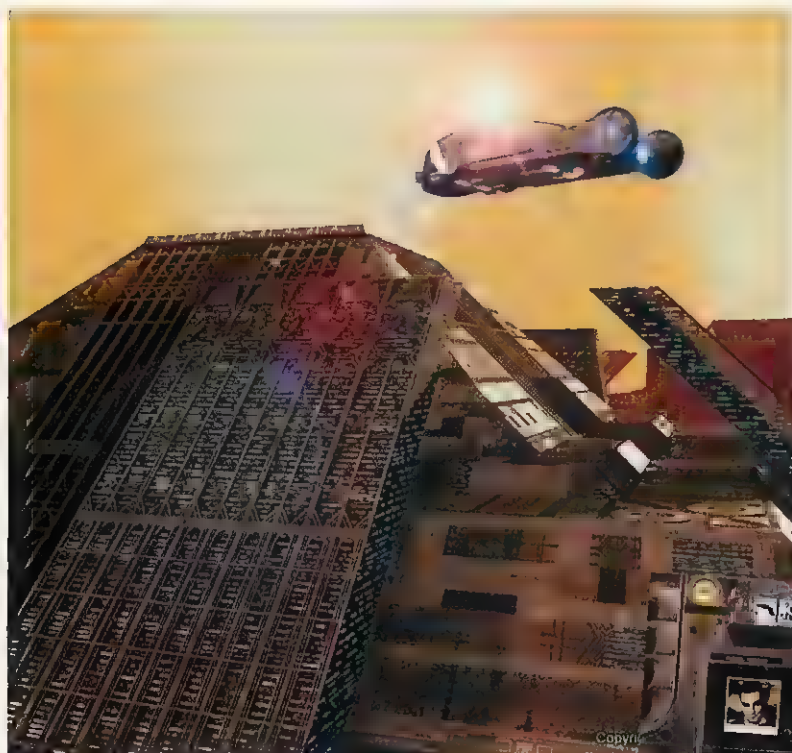
Goro swung the sword back and forth, took a deep breath, con-

Continued on page 95

GAMES

By Eric T. Baker

The year's best SF gaming experience started out as both a top movie and novel.

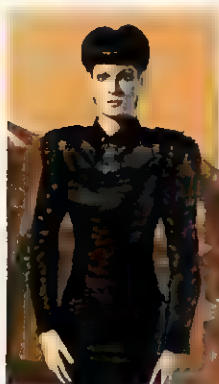


cally, doing so is a balancing act between what it costs to buy into the franchise and how many people the franchise's name will bring to the stores. All too often, this maneuver fails because the care spent in finding a franchise is not equaled to the care spent in making the game. The early Lucas Arts Nintendo games suffered from this fault. *Bladerunner* does not suffer from a lack of care spent on the game itself. The game would be beautiful to watch and fun to play even if it wasn't based on the Ridley Scott film, which ironically was produced from the franchise already staked out by the Philip K. Dick novel, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* The game parallels the film, beginning on the same day in the year 2019 that the film did. The player controls the actions of Ray McCoy, who is investigating a crime he suspects of being committed by Replicants at the same time that Decker (Harrison Ford's character in the movie) is tracking his own crime. You encounter signs of Decker, but you never actually meet him.

What the player does encounter, in full screen, 640 x 480, millions of colors, 15 frames a second video are 70 individual characters created by the use of optical motion capture technology. What that means is that the designers filmed real actors performing the various actions and gestures that the characters would perform, and then mapped the animated character designs over the actors' motions. It's a technique that lets the characters'

movements, if not their actual "look," appear more real. For instance, the player's character, McCoy, looks very natural running to his police car, but his raincoat doesn't billow in the wind. I suspect this is why most characters have short hair and the ones that don't are wearing hats.

The world these motion-captured characters move through is gorgeous. The computer artists created or recreated from the movie over 130 sets. That is 130 "locations" where the action takes place. Most are very



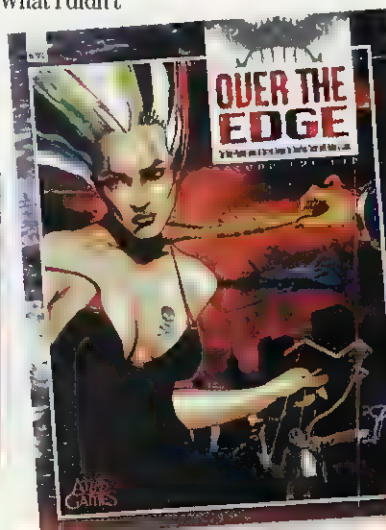
ABOVE: Philip K. Dick would be surprised to learn that he'd spawned a hit video game.

BELOW: Boba and Darth in Decipher's newest expansion.

I'D HAD THE PROMOTIONAL MATERIAL FOR *Bladerunner: The First Real-Time 3D Adventure* (Westwood Studios)

for about a month, but the game itself showed up two nights ago. From that point, the rest of my life pretty much ceased. I got to sleep last night because I hit a technical glitch that I couldn't solve until today, but other than that, I have been clicking away, stalking Replicants through the naked city. If it wasn't for the deadline of this column, I'd still be chasing them. This is a *good* game.

Last time I talked about gaming companies and their need to develop franchises in order to keep gamers coming back and buying more of their products. What I didn't mention was the other side of franchise equation, which is buying the rights to an existing franchise (usually from the worlds of film, TV, or literature), and then doing a game based on that franchise. Economi-



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detailed and all perfectly fit the dark, dirty, hopeless atmosphere of the film. Of course, the detail is not just there for atmosphere, it is integral to the game play.

The genre from which *Bladerunner* descends is called "hunt and click." The basic game play is that a character representing the player is put into a location. The player uses the mouse to move the cursor over every object in the location. If the cursor changes color, the player clicks on the object and is rewarded with a clue. When all the clues have been collected from a location, the player moves the character to the next location, that location usually determined by the clues the player found. This where the detailed "sets" in *Bladerunner* come in. Have you found all the clues or not? Is that a piece of trash or is it a clue? Since the player's character interacts with the other characters by clicking on them, the large number of characters engenders the same questions: Should I talk to that character or not? Has it told me all it can? Has it told the truth in what it has said?

It is at this intersection that hype and game-play collide. The promotional material for *Bladerunner* claims that it has an advanced AI and that each character has its own agenda and will react to McCoy based on what he already knows and what he asks them. The copy writers claim this makes the game more varied and challenging than traditional "hunt and click" games which follow a "branching" architecture for their plots. Without tearing into the source code, I can't say if *Bladerunner* really has a breakthrough AI or if it is just built with a very complex decision tree. I can say that the game does play with noticeable differences each time, particularly in the third and fourth acts. Acts one and two are pretty linear, but after that things can change in vary surprising ways.

The game is not perfect, but occasionally the designers use its disadvantages to surprise you. One of the most annoying things is that the player cannot simply jump his character, McCoy, from one "set" to another. He has to leave the one he's at, often ride his air car, and frequently travel in elevators. Early in one game I was quietly bemoaning that I again had to waste ten seconds watching McCoy make the long run from his car to the elevator across the roof of his apartment building and wondering why the designers didn't just put the landing pad closer to the door, when suddenly a Replicant jumped out and charged McCoy.

Besides the waiting while McCoy runs around the sets, the only other big flaw in *Bladerunner* is that, advanced AI or no, the game will only let you do what it wants you to do. Case in point: very early on, McCoy chases a Replicant down an alley, into a building, and up a flight of stairs. At the end of the hall is a door, the only door on the hall. The Replicant has to be behind that door, but when you click on it, McCoy says, "Damn, locked," and you're stuck. McCoy has a gun in his hand, but there is no way to get him to

shoot off the "damn" lock and let himself in to face the Replicant. You have to go collect more clues so you can come at the door from a different angle. Frustrating, but not enough to keep *Bladerunner* from being the most fun I have had on my computer in nearly a year.

One small flaw with *Bladerunner* is that while its system requirements are fairly light (a 4x CD ROM, a Pentium 90, and 16 megs of RAM will let you play), its hard drive requirements are steep. One hundred and seventy Megs for the minimum install. I had to pull every other game off my 800 Meg hard drive to play *Bladerunner* and the game I took off most reluctantly was id software's *Quake II*. As with *Bladerunner*, the big difference between *Quakes I* and *II* is better AI. The improvement is illustrated very early on. Two enemy soldiers are walking away from you down a hall. You shoot one and the other dives for cover! He nearly killed me when he popped back out; I was in so much shock. The other improvement is that the enemies' bodies are built of separate polygons so that when you shoot them, not only do wounds appear where you hit, but if you do enough damage, you can blow actual body parts off the baddies. Pretty cool.

In the world of role-playing, or Real Intelligence instead of the artificial kind, three interesting things. (Thanks to the presence of a real human controlling the action, in none of these games will you be prevented from going through a door simply because it is "not yet time." Or if you are, it is time to seek a new Game Master.)

Big Eyes, Small Mouths: A Universal Japanese Anime Role-Playing Game (Guardians of Order, \$13.95) takes its name from the way that characters are drawn in Japanese animated movies or Anime. Since Japanese art styles are not rooted in the Greco-Roman view of the human body the way that Western Art is, Anime has a distinctive look to it, and the thing that most Westerners notice first is the big eyes that all the "good" characters have. Westerners tend to be depicted with small eyes and huge noses, but that's a different column. Suffice it to say that lots of Anime style art is on view in this rulebook, which is quite lavishly illustrated for an offering from a small company.

The game tries to give Game Masters and players rules for conducting games in all the genres of Anime, from historical Samurai dramas to modern day romantic comedies to far future Mecha (giant robot) action series. It tries to do this in 90 pages of large type and with only three characteristics. As the introduction itself warns, players looking for gritty realism should seek another game system. The idea of *Big Eyes, Small Mouths* is to provide guidelines within which players and Game Masters can collaborate to have a good time. This is game system of ideas and suggestions rather than one of hard rules.

Similarly, *Over the Edge: The Role-Playing Game of Surreal Danger, Second Edition* (Atlas Games) is also a game system more

based on suggestions than rules. Instead of being for almost any setting, however, *OTE* is for one very specific setting: the Mediterranean island of Al Amarja. Imagine the *X-Files* meets *The Prisoner*. Jonathan Tweet presents his game mechanics in only 60 pages (although with much smaller type than *Big Eyes, Small Mouths*) and spends the other 170 pages introducing Al Amarja and presenting three introductory adventures.

Jonathan Tweet is one of the original designers of *Ars Magica*, a medieval role-playing game that is one of the most rules heavy systems ever produced, so he knows how to quantify a world if he wants to. In *OTE*, he has taken another route, as has Mark Mackinnon in *BEs, SMs*. I have a lot of sympathy for the emphasis on character and actual "role-playing" that both systems are trying to foster. I have found over the years, however, that I am much more comfortable knowing exactly how much my character's telekinesis spell can lift and when it will work than I am with having it work when and how "best suits the story." This is a personal preference. *Big Eyes, Small Mouths* and *Over the Edge* are two good games in a style that I don't happen to be comfortable playing.

Firestorm: Shockwave, the Fourth Corporate War Book Two (R. Talsorian Games), on the other hand, is a sourcebook for the *Cyberpunk* role-playing system. If you can get past its initial, silly premise that the world's two largest Mercenary Corporations (that is, corps whose business is training and leasing soldiers-for-hire) would go to all out war with one another without either one being paid to do so, then this is a fine and interesting sourcebook. It is equal parts future history, new character classes, cool hardware, and scenarios. Even if you are playing different system, if it has a cyberpunk or futuristic military background, then there are things here that you can use.

Decipher Inc. has released *Cloud City*, the newest Expansion Set for its *Star Wars Customizable Card Game*. The full set has 180 cards representing the events at the end of *The Empire Strikes Back*. Each individual pack contains nine cards, 5 common, 3 uncommon, and 1 rare. The cards each show a scene from the movie. You need the basic set of cards to actually play.

After computer games, collectable card games are the next largest part of the gaming market. It is a market that was created basically whole cloth in 1993 by Richard Garfield and his game, *Magic: The Gathering*. Now the U.S. patent office has granted Wizards of the Coast, Garfield's company, a patent on collectable card games based on the method in which the game is played. With this patent, Wizards of the Coast is now going to seek royalties from the other makers, like Decipher, of collectable card games. They are offering discounts to any maker who accepts their license agreement before January 1, 1998. As of this writing, there is no word that anyone has yet taken them up on the offer. □

SKIN DRAGONS TALK

Continued on page 91

centrated, thought, *Maybe that wouldn't be such a bad idea.*

The dragons squirmed. *You could have done that before we got to you, but now you're different, smarter. You see the universe around you.*

Goro twisted the sword around, holding the edge close to his belly. *Yeah, I see it. And I don't like it. Maybe I would have been better off if I had ended up like these poor mummies.*

Maybe. The dragons stopped moving.

Goro wished he didn't still feel them. He didn't breathe. Didn't move the sword.

Well? the dragons asked.

I'm thinking.

Precisely.

Suddenly, shafts of light flooded the cracks in the spacecraft.

"Goro Beltran," a voice crackled through his helmet phones. "This is a combined Lunar Sheriff Department and Motocorp posse. Both organizations have ordered us to retrieve you dead or alive. We have you surrounded. Please give yourself up."

Without saying anything, Goro turned his sword around.

"Goro Beltran," the radio voice went on, "are you there?"

"Yes," Goro said, "I want to make a deal."

"We are not authorized to make deals. Surrender, or fight."

Goro walked out into the open with his sword on and held high.

Without a word, the three deputies and three Motocorp enforcers attacked him.

When the dragons put him into fighting mode it was easy, and even a little boring, to hack them all to pieces. Goro almost laughed out loud.

This is like a movie again? asked the dragons.

Yes. If this were an old yakuza movie, they would freeze-frame this part and the closing credits would roll over us.

This movie has only begun, said the dragons. *So what now? Are you joining our gang?*

Maybe I'm joining your gang, said Goro. *Or maybe you are joining mine.*

The dragons laughed again.

After all, this is my body, my brain, my mind. Are you sure?

For the first time in my life, yes. Goro began hopping back to Tranquility City. *Here's the deal. I'm going to walk back to Motocorp HQ, and demand a meeting with the oyabun and Sheriff Moe. If they want to study you and what you've done to me, they're going to have to cut me in on all their business.*

And if they refuse?

I'll cut myself open without a laser, and let you loose to do what you please.

There may be hope for your species yet.

Goro laughed.

The dragons in Goro's skin laughed with him. Dragons laughed all over the galaxy. □

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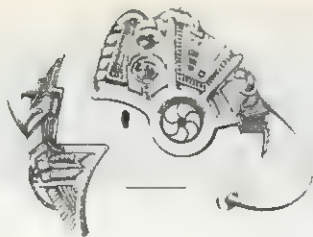
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CRAPHOUND

Continued from page 42

I told myself I'd never do. It was a set of four matched Li'l Orphan Annie Ovaltine glasses, like Grandma's had been, and seeing them in the auctioneer's hand took me right back to her kitchen, and endless afternoons passed with my coloring books and weird old-lady hard candies and Liberace albums playing in the living room.

"Ten," I said, opening the bidding.

"I got ten, ten, ten, I got ten, ten, ten, who'll say twenty, who'll say twenty, twenty for the four."

Craphound waved his bidding card, and I jumped as if I'd been stung.

"I got twenty from the space cowboy, I got twenty, sir, will you say thirty?"

I waved my card.

"That's thirty to you sir."

"Forty," Craphound said.

"Fifty," I said even before the auctioneer could point back to me. An old pro, he settled back and let us do the work.

"One hundred," Craphound said.

"One fifty," I said.

The room was perfectly silent. I thought about my overextended MasterCard, and wondered if Scott/Billy would give me a loan.

"Two hundred," Craphound said.

Fine, I thought. Pay two hundred for those. I can get a set on Queen Street for thirty bucks.

The auctioneer turned to me. "The bidding stands at two. Will you say two-ten, sir?"

I shook my head. The auctioneer paused a long moment, letting me sweat over the decision to bow out.

"I have two — do I have any other bids from the floor? Any other bids? Sold, \$200, to number 57." An attendant brought Craphound the tumblers. He took them and tucked them under his seat.

I was fuming when we left. Craphound was at my elbow. I wanted to punch him — I'd never punched anyone in my life, but I wanted to punch him.

We entered the cool night air and I sucked in several lungfuls before lighting a cigarette.

"Jerry," Craphound said.

I stopped, but didn't look at him. I watched the taxis pull in and out of the garage next door instead.

"Jerry, my friend," Craphound said.

"What?" I said, loud enough to startle myself. Scott, beside me, jerked as well.

"We're going. I wanted to say goodbye, and to give you some things that I won't be taking with me."

"What?" I said again, Scott just a beat behind me.

"My people — we're going. It has been decided. We've gotten what we came for."

Without another word, he set off toward his van. We followed along behind, shell-

shocked.

Craphound's exoskeleton executed another macro and slid the panel-door aside, revealing the cowboy trunk.

"I wanted to give you this. I will keep the glasses."

"I don't understand," I said.

"You're all leaving?" Scott asked, with a note of urgency.

"It has been decided. We'll go over the next 24 hours."

"But why?" Scott said, sounding almost petulant.

"It's not something that I can easily explain. As you must know, the things we gave you were trinkets to us — almost worthless. We traded them for something that was almost worthless to you — a fair trade, you'll agree — but it's time to move on."

Craphound handed me the cowboy trunk. Holding it, I smelled the lubricant from his exoskeleton and the smell of the attic it had been mummified in before making its way into his hands. I felt like I almost understood.

"This is for me," I said slowly, and Craphound nodded encouragingly. "This is for me, and you're keeping the glasses. And I'll look at this and feel..."

"You understand," Craphound said, looking somehow relieved.

And I did. I understood that an alien wearing a cowboy hat and sixguns and giving them away was a poem and a story, and a thirtyish bachelor trying to spend half-a-month's rent on four glasses so that he could remember his Grandma's kitchen was a story and a poem, and that the disused fairground outside Calgary was a story and a poem, too.

"You're craphounds!" I said. "All of you!"

Craphound smiled so I could see his gums and I put down the cowboy trunk and clapped my hands.

Scott recovered from his shock by spending the night at his office, crunching numbers, talking on the phone, and generally getting while the getting was good. He had an edge — no one else knew that they were going.

He went pro later that week, opened a chichi boutique on Queen Street, and hired me on as chief picker and factum factotum.

Scott was not Billy the Kid. Just another Bay Street shyster with a cowboy jones. From the way they come down and spend, there must be a million of them.



Our draw in the window is a beautiful mannequin I found,

straight out of the '50s, a little boy we call The Beaver. He dresses in chaps and a Sheriff's badge and six-guns and a miniature Stetson and cowboy boots with worn spurs, and rests one foot on a beautiful miniature steamer trunk whose leather is worked with cowboy motifs.

He's not for sale at any price. □

BOOKS

Continued from page 16

theoretical physicist at CalTech, and Max Jablon joins their team.

Max proceeds to develop theories that could explain the continuously evolving data Alicia is getting from the sphere. His first theory is that it is an "Einstein-Rosen Bridge", a wormhole connected to elsewhere in space-time, shielded by a substance with negative energy density. After a fatal accident occurs, when the sphere has apparently emitted a strong burst of photons, Max comes to a different conclusion: the sphere is a new "child universe" created by the high-energy experiment, with an entirely new universe evolving inside.

Their scientific efforts to document and explain the sphere occur in parallel with their fight to keep it from being taken away by first the Brookhaven scientists, who keep trying to get Alicia's sphere even after they create their own, much-larger sphere, and then by the federal authorities. In addition to these antagonists, Alicia must fight news reporters, the standard anti-science religious fanatics (who actually kidnap her at one point), New-Age crazies, politicians, and other such forces, and must enlist as allies not only Zak and Max, but her editorial-writer father, her father's lawyer, and even her best (non-scientist) friend Jill. In the end, they must steal the sphere again, eluding both university and federal authorities who are trying to take it away.

Benford has done an excellent job here showing the interplay between scientists at work, and in that regard *Cosm* may even be the equal of *Timescape*. And even though the future of the world is not at stake, as it was in *Timescape*, the narrative in *Cosm*, despite a few slow sections, is quite compelling.

Cosm's greatest strength, however lies in its characters, especially Alicia, Max, and Jill. Benford should be especially commended for taking the risk of having his viewpoint character, Alicia, be not only female (as was his protagonist in *Artifact*), but black as well. He even survives the significant risk, for a male author, of having Alicia and her friend Jill engage in conversations about their love lives. (Male authors usually avoid this, I think, due to a version of the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle — they know that they can never get unperturbed observations.)

Alicia Butterworth is both likeable and believable, which is an essential for the reader to maintain their sympathies and interest in the story. This is a novel, after all, about scientists who are somewhat selfishly seeking to hoard a scientifically important and potentially dangerous object from other, better equipped scientists. Even theoretical physicist Max Jablon develops into a sympathetic character, especially after he and Alicia's relationship develops romantically, which is (quite appropriately) delayed until near the end of the book.

Cosm is an extremely successful novel, wor-

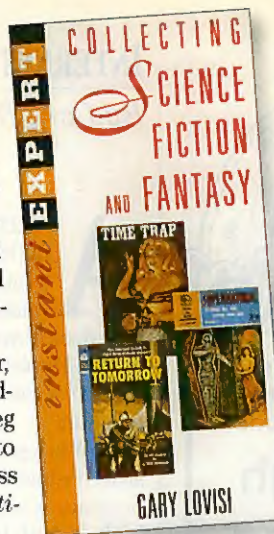
thy of consideration for the major awards this year. Without the benefit of the future-of-the-world urgency found in *Timescape*, or the exotic locales and thriller pacing of *Artifact*, Benford has nevertheless once again produced an engaging, well-paced novel portraying sympathetic scientists at work.

Only time will tell, however, whether *Cosm* will be considered among the novels of Greg Benford as equal in stature to *Timescape*, or only in a class with the much less lauded *Artifact*.

D. Douglas Fratz

RECENT AND RECOMMENDED

Science fiction readers often fall so in love with the field that they want to become more than that, and then is born another science fiction collector. But how to begin? How do you



learn the difference between the important historical artifacts and the worthless junk? How does a beginner avoid being taken advantage of in this alien-eat-alien world? Gary Lovisi, founder and sponsor of the annual New York Collectible Paperback Expo, is here to help. His *Collecting Science Fiction and Fantasy* (Alliance Publishing, paperback, 136 pages, \$14.00), the newest release in the company's Instant Expert line, is designed to quickly turn a neophyte into an authority. The volume leads you through the decade by decade expansion of the SF field, and also includes

sections on the 50 most valuable paperbacks at auction, the 20 most collectible SF imprints, a collectors' glossary and more. Beginners will obviously benefit the most, as they enjoy learning the ins and outs of the field, but even experts will find it fun to test the extent of their knowledge.

BOOKS TO WATCH FOR

The UFO Files, edited by Ed Gorman and Martin H. Greenberg (DAW). Forget *The X-Files* — the truth behind alien visitations is *really* in this volume of 23 original short stories by the likes of Gregory Benford, Alan Dean Foster and Kristine Kathryn Rusch.

First Contacts: The Essential Murray Leinster, by Murray Leinster (NESFA Press). The 1945 short story "First Contact" is one of the great SF stories of all time. But the Hugo-winning Murray Leinster was more than that, as this collection of the best of his short fiction ably proves.

Animated Objects, by Linda Addison (Space and Time). A collection of poetry and prose by a brave new voice from one of the oldest small press publishers in SF. Per Barry Malzberg's introduction, Addison's first collection is "remarkable," and Malzberg's praise is not so easily won.

Star Trek Voyager: Echoes, by Dean Wesley Smith, Kristine Kathryn Rusch and Nina Kiriki Hoffman (Pocket). Three acclaimed authors team up for a time travel story that brings paradox to Janeway and crew. Let's hope this talented trio continues on for as long as they can squeeze their names on book covers.

Maximum Light, by Nancy Kress (Tor). The Nebula-winning author of the *Beggars* trilogy delivers a chilling standalone novel of genetic manipulation, a biothriller about three survivors in a world where 80% of Americans are sterile.



Checkmate, by Eric T. Baker (Penguin Roc). The debut novel by a writer whose moving short stories you've seen popping up in these pages and elsewhere recently. Consider it *Serpico* meeting SF aboard the colony ship *Jersey*.

The Best Japanese Science Fiction Stories, edited by John L. Apostolou and Martin H. Greenberg (Barricade Books). There's more to Japanese SF than Godzilla, as the editors prove with stories from the big three of Shinichi Hoshi, Ryo Hanmura and Sako Komatsu.

Virtual Unrealities: The Short Fiction of Alfred Bester, by Alfred Bester (Vintage). These classic stories by the author of the seminal novels *The Demolished Man* and *The Stars My Destination* help bring back his brilliant career. With an introduction by Robert Silverberg.

More Amazing Stories, edited by Kim Mohan (Tor). In 1996, the oldest SF magazine ceased publication. Now *Amazing Stories*, started in 1926 by Hugo Gernsback, brings out its true last issue in book form with stories by Benford, Le Guin, Waldrop, Springer and others.

American Zombie, by Douglas Winter (Borderlands Press). One of Horror's wittiest voices brings his scalpel to bear on today's society with three brilliant and terrifying novellas.





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INTERNET

By Cory Doctorow

A SELECTION OF 'NET-BASED SCIENCE fiction treats, with thanks this month to Martha Soukup. If you want to see a site reviewed here, e-mail doctorow@well.com.

> The Ministry of Whimsy

<http://www.mindspring.com/~toones/Whimsy.html>

MoW is a small SF press devoted to whimsical, postmodern literary pursuits. Their Web presence is easy to navigate and pleasant to look at, with interviews, book reviews, the inevitable links, and a certain amount of logrolling, as the editor reviews the magazine he started, *The Silver Web*. Worth a visit.

> The Dead Media Project

<http://www.peg.apc.org/~alonsdale/media/dedmedia.html>

Cyberpunk nutbars Richard Kadrey and Bruce Sterling began a project in 1995 to document all the odd and kooky communications devices that have gone away, from dead-animal-telephone to mechanical machines that printed transmitted images in the 1920s. Check here to join their mailing list, and for pithy quotes on the nature of dead media.



Dark Horse Comics

> Dark Horse Comics

<http://www.dhorse.com/>

The publishers of such titles as *Groo*, *Star Wars: Crimson Empire* and *Predator* have a brand new Website. Features include news about upcoming titles, interviews with writers and artists, and a searchable archive of previous books.

> Galaxion

<http://www.interlog.com/~dtallan/galaxion/>

It's strange: self-published fiction is almost uniformly dreck. On the other hand, self-published comics are the only game in town if you want to read fresh stories, with original artwork and novel ideas. *Galaxion*, a space-opera comic by Tara Jenkins along with background information and other content of note.



Star Trek: The Experience

> Scream 2

<http://www.cantnot.org/scream2/>

Don't go looking for the *Scream 2* site at <http://www.scream2.com>; Web-prankster Bill Sweetman registered the domain last summer. The studio offered his "a couple hundred bucks" for this primo Internet real estate, so he laughed them off and put up a page telling the story. The people at Dimension Films haven't learned their lesson: someone else registered scream3.com a little while ago.

> Cosmic Visions

<http://www.cosmicvisions.com/>

A site distributing the electronic zine of the same name. The site has samples and covers, but the zine is only available through paid subscription. It's pretty good — solid fiction and a decent editorial section.

> Star Trek: The Experience

<http://www.startrekexp.com/>

First ViaCom gets all the fan-built *Trek* sites taken offline. Then they build a big ride in the Vegas Hilton. Then they built this site. So much for the much-vaunted *Trek* brain-trust.

> id Software: Quake II

<http://www.idsoftware.com/>

This is the videogame that ate my brain. From *Doom* to *Doom II* to *Quake* to *Quake II*, id Software's cheerfully amoral 3D shoot-em-ups are just about the most fun you can have with your computer. See! Horrendous Monsters! Hear! Their foetid breath on your neck! Feel! The horrible, horrible agony of being eviscerated by a beast from the nether-hells!

> Aardman Animations:

Wallace and Gromit

<http://www.aardman.com/>

Academy Award-winner Nick Park's Wallace and Gromit stop-motion animations are funny, witty, beautiful and highly addictive. Aardman Animations is your Wallace and Gromit connection, with official home pages for Wallace, Gromit, "Feathers" McGraw and Shaun. Fab-oo merchandise, too.

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